

Aboriginal Use of Wattles

by Norman Morrison

Wattles and Australia – they go together in the imagination. Our floral emblem is a wattle, the national colours are green and gold and of course we have Wattle Week. It's in springtime that the wattles stand out in the bush and you realise just how prolific they are. So it is hardly surprising that this large genus should have been put to use by the Aboriginal people as they traversed the land.

Over one hundred wattle species were put to some use by the different Aboriginal groups. Aboriginal plant use can be broken down into three main headings – food, medicine and material use (tools, weapons, etc), and you can find wattles listed under all three. There are even a few, such as mulga (*A. aneura*), earpod wattle (*A. auriculiformis*) and strap wattle (*A. holosericea*) which were multipurpose plants and were used for all three.

Food

The seeds of wattles were a popular food source. There are over twenty species in the Gardens which were used this way.

- *A. victoriae*, *A. notabilis* and *A. ligulata*..seeds were collected and ground into a flour which was mixed with a little water and eaten as a paste or cooked on hot ash as a damper.
- *A. stenophylla*, were roasted in the pod and then eaten
- *A. farnesiana* young pods were eaten

Gum

Many wattles exude a gum either naturally or as a response to wounding. The gum of several species in the Gardens was eaten. For some Aboriginal groups this was a snack food or a food for children. The gum could also be dissolved in water and nectar added to make a drink – this was reportedly done with *A. dealbata*.

Roots

The roots of a few wattles were also used as food. Young roots were chosen and in most cases, if not all, they were roasted before eating.

The plant/insect link

Probably the best known is the witchetty grub. The true witchetty grub, according to CSIRO, is the caterpillar of a Xyleutes moth which is found at the base of the witchetty bush (*A. kempeana*). There are other larvae of both moths and beetles which are lumped under the name 'witchetty' and there are several wattles which are regarded as 'witchetty' bushes. Lerp, a sweet sugary exudate produced by a small sap-sucker, was also collected from some wattles. Lastly, the mulga apple was an insect-produced gall found on *A. aneura* which was eaten, grub and all.

Medicinal plants

There are species in the Gardens which were used to treat headache, skin complaints, aches and pains, infections, rheumatism, colds and toothache. The Aborigines had many different methods of preparing medicines, among the most common were infusions, decoctions and smoke treatment. Here are a few examples.

- An infusion of the phyllodes of *A. lysiphloia* was used as a soothing wash for headaches and fever pains.
- An infusion of *A. melanoxylon* bark was used for rheumatism. In some areas the patient might then have their stiff joints wrapped in fur bandages and would then rest under a possum-skin blanket.
- The bark and/or roots of *A. holosericea* was infused and the liquid drunk to treat colds and laryngitis.

Smoke treatment was widely used and consisted of digging a small pit. A fire would be set in the bottom and when it was ready, leafy branches would be laid on top. If necessary, some water would also be added. The patient would either sit in the smoke and/or inhale it. Several wattle species were used for this purpose. For example, mothers and their newborn children would sit in the smoke produced by *A. aneura* to promote good health in the child and to speed the mother's recovery.

Finally, some species of wattle produce a lather when rubbed with water and this could be used medicinally. The lather obtained from the pods of *A. auriculiformis* was rubbed on itchy skin to soothe the pain.

Narcotics

The ash of several Acacia species was used to mix with the leaves of *Duboisia hopwoodii* to produce pituri. This was a highly valued trade item and the ash of *A. igulata* and *A. hakeoides* were amongst the plants utilised.

Wood

The wood from wattles was used to produce spears, boomerangs, spear throwers, clubs, shields, handles for axes and chisels, coolamons, digging sticks, clap sticks and fire drills. The universal weapon for hunting was the spear and were put to many uses.

- hunting spears which were thrown with a woomera and others which were thrown by hand
- fishing spears had to float while bird hunting spears were quite light and short.
- heavy spears for fighting and special spears for trials and for ceremonial purposes.

Many species of wattle were used to make some of these types. The heavy timber of *A. aneura* was used to make spear heads which were glued to lighter shafts. Heavier single wood hunting and fighting spears were made from the wood of *A. holosericea*. *A. melanoxylon* was one of the timbers selected for woomeras and some of the durable timbers such as *A. cowleana* were utilised to fashion the small woomera pegs which fitted into the spear shaft and had to withstand a lot of pressure during the throw.

The wood for **boomerang** manufacture was carefully selected and many wattles were employed in boomerang production.

There are quite a few examples in the Gardens among them – *A. farnesiana*, *A. harpophylla*, *A. anuera*. Apart from artefacts, the wood of some wattle species was highly valued as firewood. *A. auriculiformis*, for example, was considered to produce good coals and was slow burning.

Bark

The bark of many species could be used to produce string for bags and nets. The inner bark of species such as *A. melanoxylon* and *A. concurrens* was used for this purpose.

Pods

While fishing nets were widely used, so was the practice of drugging the water to catch fish, and again wattles were employed. Many species were used, among them the crushed green pods of *A. holosericea*, the bark of *A. falcata* and the bark and phyllodes of *A. penninervis*.