

# Australian Native Plants

## A Pruning Fact Sheet

### 1. What is this fact sheet about?

This fact sheet aims to give some basic guidelines and general background to pruning Australian native plants and hopefully enable you to prune with confidence and success.

### 2. Australian native plants

Australian plants are wonderful to have in the garden but they are not maintenance free. 'Plant and forget' is an all too often promoted horticultural myth about the growing of our Australian plants. It is true, that most Australian plants require less attention than many exotic plants, however they do benefit greatly from some fertilizing, pruning and watering. Pruning promotes healthy growth and vigor, extends the life of short lived plants and promotes a greater display of flowers.

### 3. Types of pruning

#### Tip pruning to promote lateral growth and therefore bushier plants

- Regular tip pruning of the soft new growth is preferred to infrequent hard pruning and should be commenced when plants are very young, preferable at seedling or rooted cutting stage.
- Tip pruning is best undertaken after flowering and during the growing season for quicker results. Pruning too late in the season carries the risk of reducing next seasons flowers, as I have done on a few occasions.
- Tip pruning results in an increase in flowers as it promotes more flowering wood.
- Always carry secateurs when you're out and about in the garden as this allows you to easily practice tip pruning.

#### General pruning

- When pruning to control unwanted growth, it is best to only make clean cuts that slope away from buds. Cut close to and parallel to existing branches and leaf nodes, but not flush with them.
- With large branches, first cut the bark below, then make the top cut – this prevents tearing of the bark as the branch falls away.
- Use the plants natural habit as a guide. If it is slow-growing, compact and well-shaped, then only light pruning is needed to tidy it up as necessary. If it is fast-growing, then more frequent pinching-out or pruning should be carried out.
- Prune the whole shrub at one time, that way even growth will occur all over the plant.
- It is best not to prune in winter as the resultant new growth can easily be damaged by cold wind and low temperatures.
- When cutting into old wood be aware that you may lose next years flowers on plants that flower on old wood such as many *Leptospermums*, *Melaleucas* and *Hakeas*.

#### Pruning screen/hedge plants

- Successful screen/hedge plants need to be given regular light pruning all over to promote and maintain dense growth. If you are using the Lillypillies such as: *Acmenia*, *Syzygium luehmannii* various forms and *Syzygium australe* various forms, this pruning will also keep them bushy to the ground.

### Pruning to repair damage

- When branches are broken or attacked by insects/borers the branch should be pruned back to clean undamaged wood and close to a limb or leaf node. If left in an undamaged state, branches are prone to infection and dieing back.
- After pruning large branches, advice in the past was to seal large cuts with a suitable bituminous sealing compound. These days it is generally not recommended that this needs to be done. I have not used a sealing product for many years and have had no problems.

### Pruning to improve flowering

- Removal of old flowers should be undertaken after the flower is finished. This way the plant does not put its energy into producing seed. It also has the same effect as tip pruning as it promotes new lateral growth and hence more flowers next season. *Callistemons*, and fine-leaved *Melaleucas* certainly benefit from having the top two thirds of their flowers removed and is a 'must do' pruning action.

### Pruning to minimise new growth

- Pruning flush with the trunk should result in no new leaf growth – handy if you are pruning lower branches off a shrub to make it more tree like.

## **4. How to prune when more drastic results are required**

- Trying to keep large plants to a manageable size by pruning is hard work and is best done continually through-out the year and not once a year as is often done. Be aware that hard pruning into old wood may even kill some plants.
- If you have any old woody shrubs that are more of an eyesore than an asset in the garden, arm yourself with secateurs and a pruning saw and get stuck into it. The easiest way to rejuvenate *Callistemons*, (especially the *C. viminalis* hybrids), fine-leaved *Melaleucas* and *Leptospermums* is to lop them off at ground level. If undertaken in spring they will quickly put out new shoots and grow into bushy shrubs with attractive healthy foliage. Water well to maximise new growth. See Plate 1. for an outstanding result of hard pruning of a *Banksia*
- Drastic pruning of older more senile *Grevilleas* is not always successful; however I have seen successful results of severe pruning undertaken on *Grevillea venusta*, *Grevillea*. Orange Marmalade and the taller Queensland hybrid *Grevilleas* such as *Grevillea* Moonlight and Honey Gem. See Plate 2. for a great result of pruning.
- If the plant has got to the stage where you have nothing to lose – prune hard and see what happens.
- When pruning large heavy branches, make the first cut about 150 mm further out than where you need to make the final cut. When the heavy branch has been removed, make a second cut to clean up, this minimises tearing of the bark. Note that untidy cuts or torn bark can create entry points of fungal diseases etc.
- Plate 7 shows the result of pruning of trees that are far too big for their situation especially the one shown, as it is under the power lines to the house. In this position it would have been better to use one with a lower growth height in the first place.
- The foreground plant in Plate 8 has been pruned parallel to the ground, completely spoiling the shape. A much better way, is to prune branches at three levels - some near ground level, a few in the middle and the remainder higher up. When the plant

commences to grow it will fill out all over and not just at the top. This results in a much better visual look. As well, the *Grevillea* in the rear of Plate 8 needs hard pruning as it is in the senile stage and will slowly decline. Hard pruning will either revitalise it or kill it. If it dies, then there is space for a new plant. Your garden has not space for a poor performing or senile plant unless you have sentimental attachments to them.

- Plants that develop a lignotuber usually respond very well to cutting off all growth just above the lignotuber. I have successfully done this with *Ceratopetalum gummiferum* (NSW Christmas Bush) and *Lambertia Formosa* (Mountain Devil).

## 5. Maintenance of pruning tools

Use sharp tools and disinfect them by cleaning with methylated spirits. Blunt tools leave ragged edges on the branch and are an invitation to disease to enter your plants.

## 6. Finally

A good days pruning is more satisfying than a day at your local gym and its free.

Jeff Howes  
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**Plate 1**

This four metre high *Banksia ericifolia* has been pruned close to the ground. Only after a few weeks there are already plenty of new shoots which will create a very bushy plant. I would have cut the older top branch off as well, as there are no new shoots from it.



**Plate 2**

The main branch of this mature *Grevillea* Moonlight has been pruned hard which has resulted in a mass of new shoots. Ideally when pruned, the cut should have been made at a greater angle so that water runs off, to minimise rot and fungal entry,



**Plate 3**

Do not forget to take the stake out as the plant grows. In this example the tree has grown around the stake and cannot be removed by hand.



**Plate 4**

Plants pruned like this are for show only, as often the flower buds are pruned off. The plants will need to be pruned often in the growing season to keep them 'neat and tidy'.



**Plate 5**

This *Callistemon* has been kept pruned, for neatness but allowed to flower by not pruning new growth in spring. After flowering, the plant will need to be pruned again to maintain its compact habit. Note the use of volcanic pebbles as a ground cover.



**Plate 6**

This example shows pruning of all side shoots to try and create a quicker growing tree that has a clear trunk more suited to public places. Any regrowth will need to be continually removed for the first few years.



**Plate 7**

This is an all too common occurrence of a very large tree planted under power lines. Very hard pruning is required which completely spoils the shape of the tree.



**Plate 8**

See paragraph 4 for explanation