

Banksias Raise Interest

April 2005

April is usually a good time to see banksias in flower. This year is looking particularly good. Banksias can be easily recognised by their erect, cylindrical flower heads made up of hundreds of small, neatly arranged flowers. Typical too, are the woody seed cones with their rough texture and weird mouth-like seed boxes. These provided the inspiration for the big, bad banksia men. Of the 70-odd kinds found in Australia, Victoria has seven, while the Grampians has three.

Banksias are named in honour of Sir Joseph Banks who collected the earliest specimens known to science at Botany Bay while travelling with Captain Cook. At least one of his collections is still held at the National Herbarium in Melbourne.

The original inhabitants of the land of course had many uses for banksias. They soaked the flower heads in water to extract nectar to give them a sweet drink. The dead flower heads with their wiry threads of the dried flower parts were used to filter muddy water. Early settlers knew them as “honey suckles”.

Of the three to be found in the Grampians by far the most common is the Silver Banksia (*Banksia marginata*). It can be identified by its pale greenish yellow flowers, which contrast with the dark green of the tops of the leaves. The underside of the leaf has a silvery look. This is a plant which you can find almost anywhere in Victoria, except the northwest. It can grow as a ground-hugging shrub to a short tree of about 6 metres. It often has an open, straggly look. The seeds are eaten by the Yellow-tailed Black Cockatoo.

Also in the Grampians is the Desert Banksia (*Banksia ornata*). This is a plant that grows in abundance on sandy rises and sandplain in the Wimmera and into South Australia. It only grows as far south as near Casterton and Mt Abrupt. The egg-shaped yellow flower heads tipped with grey, combine well with the light green, toothed leaves. It forms a compact shrub of between one and two metres high.

One has to get up to the high ridges and peaks of the Grampians to find the Rock Banksia (*Banksia saxicola*). For many years this was thought to be a form of the Coast Banksia (*Banksia integrifolia*), which it closely resembles. However, the bark is thinner and smoother and the seeds are held in the cone for much longer than its coastal cousin. The upper surface of the leaves is dark green while underneath they are pale and velvety. Adult leaves have smooth edges. They can grow to heights of over 10 metres and form very elegant trees.

The photos below are (from left):

Silver Banksia – the most common of the three banksias found in the Grampians.

Desert Banksia – this grows from the Big Desert as far south as Casterton and Mt. Abrupt.

Rock Banksia – almost endemic to the Grampians; a few occur among rocks on Wilson’s Promontory.

