

BORDER CROSSINGS

ORIGINS

BOTANY BAY LEARNING RESOURCES

Eucalyptus



700 year old Red River Gum, Wonga Wetlands, New South Wales

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:700_yr_red_river_gum.jpg

What do Indigenous people call this plant?

“Yaarran” is the name given to the most common “River Red Gum” Eucalyptus tree in Australia in the Gamilaraay, Yuwaalaraay, Yuwaalayaay languages, in the area now known as the north western New South Wales region of Australia.

A list of names for other varieties of Eucalyptus trees in the Gamilaraay, Yuwaalaraay, Yuwaalayaay, Nganyaywana and Ngarabal languages can be found at:

https://mdahlem.net/birds/plant/euc_abo.php

When was this plant first documented?

Abel Janszoon Tasman's journal written on 2nd December 1642 during his voyage of exploration to Tasmania recorded that they had "found trees that secreted gum". Other European explorers (e.g. William Dampier and Captain James Cook) also wrote about the eucalyptus trees they encountered.

How many varieties of this plant are known?

There are over 900 types of Eucalyptus trees and shrubs.

Where and how was the plant originally grown and used?

Indigenous Australians traditionally practice fire-stick farming, now more commonly known as cultural burning and cool burning. This is the practice of using controlled fires to control weeds and to clear undergrowth, facilitate hunting and change plant and animal species in the area. It has been re-introduced recently as controlled fires reduce the damage caused by wild fires. The Noongar people from South Western Australia have been at the forefront of this re-introduction. The Eucalyptus tree has adapted to the frequent fires in Australia and some varieties actually need it to thrive.

How do Indigenous people relate to this plant?

The eucalyptus is a holy tree for some Indigenous Australians. For them it represents the division of the Underworld, Earth and Heaven. Perhaps this is because it is 'reborn' from the ashes after a fire.

The Indigenous people of Australia make good use of the eucalyptus tree, using its wood to craft bark canoes, bowls, musical instruments and weapons. The bark is used as roofing. The leaves from some species are soaked in water to produce a medicinal tea. The leaves are also used as bedding. Some of the other leaves are very sharp and are used for cutting meat.

When and how did this plant first come to Britain?

Seeds for Eucalyptus trees were first brought to the UK in 1774 and taken to Kew Gardens to be grown. These specimens had a low tolerance to frost and did not thrive in the UK. It was not until the mid 1800s when frost resistant varieties were brought to the UK from Tasmania.

Special properties

The leaves are crushed up and can be used as an antibacterial poultice, or held under the nose to relieve nasal congestion. They can also be eaten to relieve dysentery.

The leaves are considered to have a spiritually purifying effect and are used for repelling negative energy. When burned, they are also good at warding off flies and other insects.

It was also known as the Fever Tree because the sap and bark were used to treat fevers and respiratory tract infections. They also boil the gum in water and when it is cooled use it as an ointment on sores and cuts. The sap is also used to treat upset stomachs.

Australian First Peoples had been using Eucalyptus for healing for a very long time before the first Europeans recorded its medical benefits. In 1778 surgeons aboard British ships recorded its use by Indigenous people for wound healing and cleaning because of its antiseptic properties.

Fun facts

Most eucalyptus trees are evergreens whose leaves are covered in highly flammable oil glands. If they are set on fire, they can quite literally explode!

Several countries (including Bangladesh, Portugal and South Africa) have removed Eucalyptus trees as they use a lot of water (which are needed for crops) and also because they are highly flammable and very dangerous if there is a wildfire. California, which has recently suffered with wildfires for several years, is also looking at removing the Eucalyptus tree.

Professor Jakelin Troy (a Ngarigu woman from the Snowy Mountains of New South Wales and Director of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research at The University of Sydney) has said that, "In English, we give things very static names and then that's what something is known as, always. But from an Aboriginal point of view, trees and plants get different names at different times of year. The historical records for the Sydney area give us a snapshot of what something was called at a particular time, and quite often the name will be about the kind of thing that it does at that time... I don't see why we should see trees as being one-word wonders. They are much more than that."* This means that the Eucalyptus tree (and other plants) can have a different name according to the season, whether or not it is flowering, and which animals are attracted to it at the time.

[*https://theplanthunter.com.au/culture/say-name-speaking-indigenous-names-plants/](https://theplanthunter.com.au/culture/say-name-speaking-indigenous-names-plants/)

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