

S.G.A.P. ACACIA STUDY GROUP
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Continuing the question of pruning. The small almost prostrate specimens such as *A. aculeatissima* and *A. brownii*, are simply cut to shape.

The greatest difficulty will be met with the intermediate types 6 to 12 feet (an exception is *A. howittii*, which is said to stand hard pruning). Nip off the usual 6 to 8 inches of the first year's growth, thence be a bit careful but still prune each year. I once cut fairly hard an *A. acinacea* when four feet high; it looked very sick for the next three months. You can probably cut off 10 to 12 inches in the second year and one to two feet in the third year, depending on the mature height of the tree. As a guide, say two feet off a 12 feet specimen, afterwards prune to shape. This rule is not hard and fast. If the shrub tends to shoot upwards too quickly, cut harder. Specimens tend to do this if planted in a semi-shaded place and require more drastic treatment. In all cases, lanky lateral branches should be removed to ensure a shapely plant.

The above instructions must be varied at times; one will only learn by trying it out and I want you to experiment on your own trees and shrubs. You will find it most rewarding as it means possessing wattles quite unlike those usually seen, attractive even in the non-flowering period. Most of them after all have unusual foliage and pruning will show them off. A word of hope – you cannot do any real harm to most plants by experimental pruning, unless, of course, you do something silly and really slash the specimen. A word of warning – if you cut a fairly large branch half an inch or more in diameter, paint it over with one of the market preparations like “Prunex” to ensure freedom from infection such as “Die-back” which will infiltrate from the unprotected cut and could destroy the tree.

If you have any specimens in tubs, as previously suggested, they will grow rapidly and profusely and harder cutting than usual will be indicated. This will be an opportunity to see just what they will stand when planted under special conditions. Water tub specimens frequently as they easily dry out, use a heavy mulch and fertilise twice as often as with open planted types since they have no extensive root system to forage for food.

The best time to prune? Authorities say that immediately after flowering is the optimum time. Remember to sterilise the pruning knife in formalin or other disinfectant.

Little or no attention has been given to the pruning of natives generally. I suggest that what applies to wattles applies to most Australian specimens. The current trend of thought is that these should be grown as near as possible in conditions resembling their native bush habitat. Close planting, no manure, no pruning, no interference whatever, perhaps a little water, in their early years and dry periods. I agree up to a point but it should be remembered that such conditions involve a high plant mortality. Nature has no worries as it has plenty to draw on and the loss of a few or many means little with the huge replacements at hand. This hardly applies in home gardens where one just cannot afford to lose too many specimens; for one thing, they are very dear to buy, too dear I feel, and that is one reason why I am pressing for propagation by seed.

I have over the past three years seen a number of native gardens of all types, some good and some not so good. They all have this in common – few wattles which when present did much to show off the garden, no pruning and like wattles without attention, not particularly attractive without bloom. Oftentimes planted too closely together and being uncut, many times a tangled mass. I am sure that even a simple pruning to shape after flowering will improve all native displays. I believe too that all plants are benefited by a mild manure during the first two years. Blood and bone twice yearly (September and January) fits in well. This should be covered by a heavy mulch of half rotted compost or other suitable substance to prevent weed growth and evaporation. Small seedlings (native or otherwise) will push on faster if free from weed competition. This means for the first two years and is well worth doing. As many acacias have roots close to the surface, simply pull off the tops, not the roots, of weeds of any size. This is enough to keep them in control.

A lot of wattles even when seedlings are long and fragile. If you bought costly exotics you would be most unhappy about your money's worth if you did not tie them to some sort of stake, early on anyhow. Otherwise winds will, at the best, disturb the root system and delay growth. Do the same to your wattles; you won't regret the minor amount of trouble involved. And, finally, water in dry times at the very least in the first season. A wattle suited to the area will in its second season have a reasonably deep root system and need not be watered in the second year except when very dry, but all will benefit by a second year's watering.

In September 1962 I planted 70 beautifully grown acacias in tubes which were sent to me by a wellwisher who I previously did not even know. All of the varieties sent, I am sure from experience, will grow on this land. They were given no attention; I did not even see them again until recently, they were treated rough as in Nature. In a recent inspection I found only seven survivors. Their situation is in long grass and I probably missed some, but even if another ten are still going, it does something to boost my point that the good old fashioned tough Australian plants won't grow anywhere in the bush without some early care, unless, of course, you are able to emulate Nature and plant myriads. It seems to me that this experience is not unexpected. These plants were well grown. They were from a nursery where from their earliest times they had all care and attention. They were born under special conditions not in any way resembling the upbringing of the bush plants which obviously have to fend for themselves and this applies to most of our plantings whether you grow them at home from seed or buy them from a nursery. They will be given VIP treatment which will give little hope of successful growing in the bush on their own. I believe that the only plants likely to survive under bush conditions will be those grown specially for such planting, that is to say, allowed to fend for themselves from the very beginning. You could do it at home with your own seeds and I think it is worth trying.

We already have a donation to our proposed seed bank. Mr. Payne has been good enough to forward a goodly quantity of seeds of *A. vestita* and *A. polybotrya*. Both are beautiful wattles and I will be glad to forward seed of these to anyone who requires them. Will you please accompany your request with a stamped addressed envelope.

As the festive season is at hand, may I wish you a cheerful peaceful Christmas and a New Year of fulfillment – gardenwise particularly.

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