

S.G.A.P. ACACIA STUDY GROUP
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The Bush Versus Garden Methods of Growing Australian Plants

Both have supporters. At present the bush method is most favoured. This latter means trying to emulate, as far as possible, their natural wild conditions. Close planting and hence plenty of mutual protection, no restrictions as to upward growth, no pruning, reliance on nature's own manure – compost, and on this also, for conservation of moisture. No staking, counting on nature's method of combating disease and of course, no watering. With some reservations I am prepared to agree this is the way we should attempt to grow them.

There are problems, however, and the first one arises from the question of the birth conditions of the seedlings. The point at issue being whether the seedlings grown for garden conditions (nursery treatment) can take it when suddenly thrown out to fight for themselves? One believes reasonably that different treatment should be given young plants according to their ultimate set of conditions, and it is possible that they can be regimented if their destiny is in mind from the start of their life.

If they are to be garden specimens see that they get special attention until planted out and continue this for their lifetime. But if you want to try the natural method, and I think we all should, make special preparations. I still believe hard coated seeds are difficult to germinate by any method, but troubles do not end here. Many wattles are temperamental beings for at least the first two months and many are lost despite careful attention. Once they are established, and my experience gives three months as the deadline (preferably four) their treatment for planting in the bush alters once they have a small root system. Gradually withdraw all watering, they are not to be staked and the soil not disturbed (no aeration by cultivation) leave them out in all weathers and generally neglect them for the next three to four months. No nourishment, no water, and do not discourage the weeds. Theoretically you should now have a hardy plant ready for nature's conditions.

I have not tried this but feel you would lose some before planting in the open. Therefore, prepare more than usual. Plant in close formation. I don't think you would be cheating if you provided adequate drainage. Otherwise deposit in your own soil without previous preparation in an open position as most wattles thrive in the sun. Thence one year without attention and note the progress. Anyone with even a small garden can do this, since close planting (I don't know as yet a suitable distance, but say 2 feet) will take up little of your garden space. Observations during last summer's dry weather lead me to believe that most young wattles, even well treated nursery specimens, do not easily die from lack of water even over long periods. This should be an important and easy experiment available to all, so please try it and report.

Taking the opposite view, there is always the possibility that better specimens of bush plants can be grown by giving them similar, even if not so intensive, treatment to that given other plants bred especially for garden conditions. You will recall there has already been a weakening of the "neglect them" treatment of natives. Until recently it was authoritatively held that native plants should have no manure. Now, as you know, it is admitted that a mild manure, ie blood and bone, is extremely beneficial. Let us beware of "folk lore" in botany as in many other things – it is my greatest headache in the management of the sick human. I have said before that old fashioned ideas, certainly not all of them wrong, are respected from book to book and mouth to mouth until

they are taken for granted. I stress that this section exists to attempt to prove things by trial, error and discussion. It does not exist to blindly follow any enthusiastic, even if sincere and well meaning, statement of unsubstantiated opinion.

As previously mentioned 70 first class well grown nursery specimens were planted in the rough at Bethongable eighteen months ago and given no attention. 90% died. I have admitted the conditions were tough but nature produces wattles in rock crevices in Central Australia, so what does tough mean, after all. So far I can say, although I have no exact figures, that of the 500 odd wattles planted in the new garden over the last two years, those given attention during the first year have outstripped the untreated. Omitting the indigenous, there are exceptions. Some like *A. retinodes*, *A. cyanophylla* and *A. longifolia* will grow any time with or without treatment on my land. But anything from a warmer climate will not thrive without some encouragement.

One very successful and experienced gardener in the person of A. E. Brooks, author of "Australian Native Plants for Home Gardens" (which book I can strongly recommend) gives support to those who believe in the non bush method.

Under the heading "Cultivation" he writes:

"Perhaps the kindest thing that was ever done for Australian garden plants was the spread of the belief that they need no attention at all because this caused many people to grow them. It is, however, a fallacy, because most of our native plants appreciate a share of the good things when they are grown in our gardens.

It is true that a garden or part of one which retains native flora in its natural state may be very beautiful. However, in nature, the struggle for existence is often acute. From hundreds of seeds only a few may germinate, and many of these may not survive for long. Those which do, often have to fight continuously to reach up towards the light and become straggling in appearance as a result.

In the garden, by contrast, each plant can be allotted the amount of room it needs and can usually be given the amount of moisture, sun, shade, or shelter which best suits its requirements.

The idea that native plants should not be cultivated probably arises from the fact that they do not receive any such attention when growing in the bushland, but it does not follow that they would not benefit from this treatment when growing in gardens.

The general rule to follow is the same as for other garden shrubs. It is not usual to interfere with the roots of any plant and this is also the rule to follow for natives; dig between the plants if you wish, but do not interfere with the roots. In many cases where the roots of a plant have been accidentally disturbed and then covered again no harm has resulted, but this is best avoided, if possible.

Keeping weeds clear from around plants usually permits them to grow all the better, and allows any seedlings a better chance to develop. During hot weather the weeds can be placed around the base of the plants to help to conserve moisture."