

Association of Societies for Growing Australian Plants Inc.

RHAMNACEAE STUDY GROUP

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Hello members. What a terrible summer this has been, with a vicious drought taking hold of most of southern Australia and then the devastating bushfires. Fortunately, none of our members have been directly affected by the bushfires, but many of our favourite bushwalking areas have been burnt out. In the ACT and Southern Tablelands region, more than 95% of Namadgi National Park and Tidbinbilla Reserve have been lost and more than half of Kosciusko National Park is burnt. Huge areas of the Victorian high country have gone, and, towards the east coast, there were extensive fires in the Shoalhaven area and Deua National Park. All of this country will regenerate over time, but differently, and most of the tall forest areas won't come back in our lifetime. Many of the areas that burned were ideal habitat for *Pomaderris*. Certainly, many of the local populations we knew were in areas badly burnt, including two large patches of *Pomaderris betulina* ssp. *actensis*, a species known only from the ACT and nearby areas. It will be interesting, once we can get back into these damaged areas, to see what sort of regeneration occurs. John Knight, of the Eurobodalla Botanic Gardens, told me that after the severe fires there several years ago *Pomaderris* seedlings came up everywhere after the first rain – and Jill Roberts reported the same reaction by *Spyridium* after a fire in Tasmania.

Rhamnaceae and Drought

Interestingly, with a few exceptions, plants of the family Rhamnaceae don't appear to be very palatable to wildlife. In January, with every skerrick of grass on my place turned to dust and gone, the kangaroos began sampling the only green things left – my shrubs. *Pomaderris* sp. 'Bungonia' did get chewed at the tips, probably by the swamp wallaby, but all of the other *Pomaderris* around the place remained virtually untouched by animals. The one green patch in the driveway, a prostrate form of *Spyridium parvifolium*, wasn't nibbled, even by the rabbits. An upright form of the same species had its tips clipped, but there was no real damage. *Cryptandra amara* and *C. propinqua* remained intact, but *C. buxifolia* was defoliated by rabbits (but is recovering and putting out fresh leaves now). *C. scortechinii*, a beacon of bright green foliage, wasn't touched – although nearby grevilleas were skeletonised by hungry kangaroos. Intrigued by this, and remembering that *C. amara* is called Bitter Cryptandra, I crushed a couple of leaves of *C. scortechinii* between my teeth – and spat them out very quickly! That species, at least, is extremely bitter. Please don't try this yourselves – some of these plants could be toxic, and I don't want to lose any Study Group members!

The long drought may itself have caused some losses amongst the Rhamnaceae. Two *Pomaderris aspera* planted here in a shady area near the creek (the closest I could get to their natural habitat of tall, wet forest) were obviously suffering by the beginning of February, dropping many of their leaves and dying back from the tips of stems. *P. angustifolia*, growing along a nearby roadside, were beginning to die back. Then, towards the end of February, we had 30 mm of rain, and it was amazing how quickly the Pomaderrises picked up after that, putting out new growth and flower buds in no time at all. Since then, the rainfall has been very patchy, but it has been enough to save most of the plants and get the grass growing again – a lovely sight after months of dry, brown surroundings. But maybe not all will recover: recently, I saw a large stretch of *P. eriocephala* by the roadside near Bungendore which had browned off completely and seemed quite dead. It's possible that they will sprout from the base again – something I've seen *P. angustifolia* and *P. pallida* do after adverse conditions have apparently killed them. If any of you see seemingly dead Pomaderris regenerating in this way, please let me know.

Feature Plant: *Spyridium parvifolium* (Dusty Miller)

S. parvifolium is a very variable but always attractive shrub. It has a wide distribution, growing in the forests of the southern high country and in more open habitats in coastal regions, extending from NSW through Victoria to South Australia and Tasmania. It occurs as prostrate forms or variously sized shrubs up to 3 metres tall, although most of the specimens I've seen have been about 1.5 m tall. The leaves are circular or oval, usually about 10 mm long and up to 10 mm wide with recurved margins. In some forms, the leaves are emarginate (that is, with a broad, shallow notch at the apex). The leaves are dark to bright green on the upper surface, with impressed veins, and greyish and tomentose beneath. Small, flattish heads of tiny cream flowers clasped in brown bracts are subtended by prominent whitish to grey floral leaves.

I have seen the taller, shrubby form near Tumut and near Burrendong Dam, NSW. Shorter and denser forms occur at the edges of forest along the Princes Highway in Gippsland, Victoria. Low-growing forms, some with dense, very attractive growth habits, can be found amongst rocky outcrops and along roadside cuttings at Wilson's Promontory, Victoria.

I have two forms growing in my garden: an open, shrubby form from the Tumut area and a prostrate form (possibly coastal) that came from Kuranga Nursery (Victoria). The prostrate form is now one metre across and still growing. It is planted in heavy, but well-drained soil where it gets some dappled shade for part of the day. At present, it is densely covered with flower heads surrounded by small white floral leaves that give the whole plant a frosted appearance.

Spyridium parvifolium is a very hardy shrub for open and partly shaded positions. The prostrate and small, dense, more floriferous forms are suitable as feature plants: the taller, more open forms make excellent filler or background shrubs.

Field Trip: South Australia

Last August, I took another trip to the Fleurieu and Eyre Peninsulas and the Flinders Ranges in South Australia. My first stop was a visit to ex-SGAP friends living at Victor Harbour. They took me on an extensive tour of the area, and we found *Spyridium coactilifolium* out at Parson's Point. This species makes up to a small neat shrub with leaves about a centimetre long (notched at the tips with a small point at the base of the notch) and flower-heads to 2 cm across). Along Ranges Road, we discovered a small plant of *S. thymifolium*, a rather open little shrub with dark green leaves against which the white floral bracts are well accentuated. There are probably lots more Rhamnaceae on the Fleurieu Peninsula, but I was only able to spend a day there before travelling on to Eyre Peninsula.

There, Hazel and Charles O'Connor very kindly gave me a home for a few days at 'Waterford', their beautiful property near Poonindie. Hazel is a mine of information on local plants, and she and Janet Smyth took me on a tour of just about every road in the district and pointed out lots of Rhamnaceae I would otherwise not have found.

On the afternoon of my arrival, Hazel took me out to Tod Reservoir to show me *Spyridium leucopogon*. This is a species I certainly wouldn't have found on my own. It grows to about 60 cm tall, but looks nothing like the other *Spyridium*s I've seen so far. The leaves are tiny, dark green and needle-like, clustered along the stem; the flower-heads are white and tiny. It does have very small, pale floral leaves, but these are only visible before the flower-heads open. This species is only found on the Eyre Peninsula. Along Reserve Road, we saw *Pomaderris flabellaris* (a lovely little shrub with small bluish-green leaves and rusty new growth), *Cryptandra leucophracta* (a small to prostrate shrublet with white floral bracts beneath the flowers and reddish new growth) and *S. spathulatum* (a shrub about a metre in height with bright green spathulate leaves and greenish-yellow, loose flower-heads subtended by greyish floral leaves. On Charleton Gully Road, we found *S. vexilliferum*, a small, open shrub with narrow, dark green leaves and pink or cream flower-heads and striking pale floral leaves. On Proude Gully Road, we got out again to look at *S. nitidum*, a medium to tallish shrub with a silvery to gold sheen on the leaves due to very fine hairs. We also found *Cryptandra tomentosa* there.

The next day, we met Janet Smyth at the Wanilla Conservation Park where we found some more *C. leucophracta* by the roadside. On Exchange Road, *S. bifidum* grew along both sides of the road. This one is a small to medium shrub with bifid floral leaves and leaves and pink or cream flower-heads. *S. bifidum* (just to confuse us!) occurs there in both the bifid form and a form with entire leaves (i.e. pointed, not notched, at the tips). It is a very beautiful species, giving the roadsides where it grows a grey-green, cloudy appearance. It is quite common in the southern areas of Eyre Peninsula. On Edillillie Road, we came across some *Pomaderris obcordata*, another fairly widespread species on the Peninsula, often occurring in quite large populations. With its small, heart-shaped, glossy leaves, pink buds and large heads of white flowers, it is one of the more spectacular *Pomaderris*s. Returning along Chandlers Gully Road, we found some more *S. vexilliferum* and *S. nitidum* – and what appeared to be a hybrid between *S. vexilliferum* and *S. bifidum*.

Before I left the next morning, I walked around the Heritage Area at 'Waterford' with Hazel. Amongst lots of grass trees, eucalypts and wattles, we found an attractive form of *S. nitidum*. It had much whiter floral bracts than those on the same species we'd previously seen. There were also some *Pomaderris flabellaris* there.

Leaving 'Waterford', with some regret, I headed for Port Lincoln to visit Dennis Westlake who runs a plant nursery called 'Trees for Eyre'. He showed me some *Pomaderris obcordata* and *Spyridium phyllicoides* he'd grown – without any prior treatment of the seed. I haven't tried to grow *Spyridium*s from seed yet, but *Pomaderris* seed I always treat with boiling water before sowing. Next, I visited Janet Smyth who came out to Coffin Bay National Park with me. There we saw a lovely population of *Pomaderris obcordata* in an exposed area above the beach. Due to the harsh conditions there, the bushes had grown very low and compact, and were a real picture in the late afternoon sun.

The next day, after visiting Kellidie Bay Conservation Park (lots of *P. obcordata* there, just past their peak flowering period), my route took me north along the Tod Highway – with a few stops, of course! Near Yeelman, in the Harold Freeman Road and Tillers Lake Road area, there were a lot of *S. phyllicoides* bushes, a rather more rangy form than those growing nearer the coast. Near Murdinga, there was *S. bifidum* growing and a large-flowered *Cryptandra* species – and more *S. phyllicoides*. Near Rudall, on the Darke Peak Road, I spotted a scruffy little plant and stopped to check it out. And, what a surprise – it turned out to be *Spyridium erymnocladum*, a rare species only known from a few sites on Eyre Peninsula. There were a few other *S. erymnocladum* plants nearby on railway embankment growing amongst *S. bifidum*. *S. erymnocladum* looks rather like a greayer, more furry *Cryptandra scortechinii*.

The last *Spyridium* I saw on my trip was at Wilpena Pound in the Flinders Ranges. I'd taken a photograph of a beautiful *Spyridium phlebopetalum* when I was there three years ago – a spectacular plant with quite dark leaves and masses of flower-heads with large white floral leaves. The leaves of this species are quite thick and have a sort of crusty coating. Unfortunately, many of the plants in this little population had succumbed to the drought and were either dead or obviously very distressed. The most floriferous plant of the group was still alive, but struggling – very sad to see. I do hope rain fell in time to save some of them.

All in all, this was a very successful trip – thanks in large part to Hazel. Some of the *Spyridium*s are spectacular, but few seem to have found their way into gardens – or even into horticultural consideration (Wrigley and Fagg list only four species in their "Australian Native Plants", and these are not the most striking species). If any of you are growing *Spyridium*s, please write and tell me about them.

***Pomaderris pallida* - another population discovered**

Pomaderris pallida was listed as a rare plant in "Rare or Threatened Australian Plants" (J. Leigh, J. Briggs and W. Hartley, 1981) under the Risk Code 3K. This code indicated that it was a "species with a range over 100 km in Australia but occurring in small populations which are restricted to highly specific habitats" and a "poorly known species" for which "accurate field distribution is inadequate".

The type specimen was collected near the Murrumbidgee River junction, and scattered populations were found along the Murrumbidgee and towards Cooma,

NSW. After the Rhamnaceae Study Group was formed, we found two additional populations, both sizeable, at Ginninderra Falls and Tuggeranong Hill (both in the ACT). Recently, on a walk in the Tinderries Nature Reserve (near Burra, NSW), we found yet another patch of *P. pallida*. Perhaps 'patch' isn't quite the right term, as this population extended for perhaps half a kilometre (a guess, but it was extensive) along a small creekline. Although we were well into drought conditions then, all of the plants were robust and healthy. All of these populations have been reported to the relevant authorities.

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