



*Crowea exalata ssp magnifolia*  
image by Maria Hitchcock

# Australian Plants Society Armidale & District Group

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## Summer Edition 2020 - 1



Epicormic regeneration shoots at Torrington

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## From the Editor

What a year we have had in Australia! Over the twelve months we have struggled with drought and record low rainfall. For two years straight, the winter rains have not arrived. For those out of town, water is just not there. In town, with tightening water restrictions, gardeners have depaired as years of work wither away.

At Saumarez Ponds, we have had by far the driest year since we started keeping rainfall records forty plus years ago. We finished with 290 mms for the year, with November and December being our saviour with 102 mms in this two month period. Lots of plants have died but amazingly, many plug on regardless – we need to plant more of these.

On top of the drought, a disaster of record proportions has hit Australia with the worst and most extensive bushfires in history. And we still have many months to go before the cooler weather arrives. The damage to the nationwide ecology is incalculable. The incineration of so much that we treasure in Australia has been unwinding before our eyes in unrelenting ferocity.

Many of our fellow Australians have had their homes and livelihoods destroyed and many have lost their lives. A holocaust has been unleashed on our plants, animals, insects, reptiles and the whole ecosystem. This is truly an age of extinction. Will there be a recovery, or is this the new normal? We are in uncharted territory

It has been extremely disappointing to have our elected Federal politicians arguing against the science of climate change and failing to prudently put into action policies that might have lessened the disaster. Will they learn from this?

It is one thing to have a budget surplus from coal exports, but at what cost? It may be as John F Kennedy described during the Cuban Missile Crisis, “the fruits of victory would be ashes in our mouth”. The environment that we are left with may not be worth living within in the Global Climate Change era.

Locally we need to learn and apply what we have learnt. Later in the Newsletter, I will list my experience with the drought hardiness of plants in the next newsletter.

Happy New Year!

**John Nevin - Editor**

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## **Parrots and Smoke**

**Pat Laher**

In Spring last year, all my Acacia plants flowered as usual. In December, a small group of King Parrots arrived on an *Acacia floribunda* outside my kitchen window and started feeding on the Acacia seeds. The parrots stayed for about three weeks feeding on this plant. I began to wonder why they weren't feeding on any of the other *Acacia floribunda* plants in my garden. Upon investigation, I discovered that the other Acacia plants did not have any seed pods.

Upon further investigation of the litter of seed pods on the ground under this particular Acacia, I discovered that the seeds in the pods were very immature. It looked like the parrots were running the seed through their beaks to extract the juice. Later on, they did the same thing with the immature seed of *Acacia viscidula*. Is this what the parrots were doing, and does anyone know about this practice.

Further to this incident, three beautiful Red-winged Parrots also appeared on the *A. viscidula* and seemed to be doing the same thing. I was later told that this species probably belonged to a breeder in the next street, as I had never seen this species of Parrot before in Uralla. They only stayed for a few days, and were very wary and had an unusual flight pattern.

Also in December, and for the very first time, one of my Xanthorrhoea plants produced a flowering spike. I was a bit excited about this and mentioned it to John Nevin whilst walking around his garden. John mentioned that several of his Grass Trees had also produced flowering spikes and wondered if the smoke from the bushfires was the cause of the flowering. Any thought from readers about this theory?

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## **Armidale Sunday Markets Annual Report Nov 2018-Oct 2019**

**by Pat Laher**

Not a lot to report during this year. Another year of drought forced Armidale Regional Council to impose severe water restrictions from Level 3 early in the year to Level 4 and then to Level 5. When Armidale moved to Level 4, which meant that town water could not be used on gardens, our committee agreed that we should no longer sell plants at the Markets.

We didn't participate at the December Markets as it was moved to the Mall and from the experience of the previous year, we anticipated that it would be a no show regarding plant sales. It was only two years ago that the Armidale area was boasting of our unlimited water supply. How quickly things can change!

We ceased our plant sales at the Markets in May and, also due to the drought, St.Peters cancelled their annual open Armidale Gardens. Thanks to John Nevin for his dedication in supplying flowering specimens during the four months of our stall at the Markets and to Colin Wilson, Phil & Julia Rose for their assistance.

### **Plant Sales**

| <u>Comparison Table</u> | 2019  | 2018 | 2017 | 2016 |
|-------------------------|-------|------|------|------|
| November                | 18    | 36   | 20   | 24   |
| December                | ----- | 3    | 16   | 21   |
| February                | 21    | 28   | 27   | 38   |
| March                   | 22    | 28   | 21   | 32   |
| April                   | 21    | 39   | 27   | 30   |
| May                     |       | 12   | 20   | 26   |
| June                    |       | 15   | 16   | 24   |
| July                    |       | 10   | 24   | 48   |
| August                  |       | 28   | 42   | 45   |
| September               |       | 33   | 30   | 37   |

|                    |           |            |            |            |
|--------------------|-----------|------------|------------|------------|
| October            |           | 33         | 60         | 50         |
| <u>Totals</u>      | <u>82</u> | <u>265</u> | <u>303</u> | <u>375</u> |
| <br>               |           |            |            |            |
| <u>St.Peters</u>   |           |            |            |            |
| <u>Plant Sales</u> | -----     | 372        | 293        | 376        |
| Combined Sales     |           | 637        | 596        | 751        |

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## **Armidale Bicentennial Arboretum Report – November 2018 - October 2019**

**by Pat Laher**

The drought continued unabated into this year with only 318.75 mm of rain here in Uralla following on from 516.25 during the 2018 period. A feature of this period and similar to last year, was that 37 days experienced rainfall below 10mm out of 51 rain days. Just a lot of light showers unfortunately. Armidale’s average rainfall is even less.

There was however, very good rainfall during November and December, which encouraged us to plant mainly along the pathways leading to and from our garden beds with WA plant species of mallee *Eucalyptus* and *Hakea*. We continued to have good access to WA plant species and so it was decided to continue planting in 2019 and deferred plantings of *Lomandra* due to the dry conditions.

During the early part of the year, we collected rubbish, pruned and mulched the garden beds. From April onwards, we watered the plantings only, firstly using town water, then dam water then Colin Wilson’s bore water from Rocky River.

Thanks to the following for their help: Colin Wilson, Penelope Sinclair, Eric Sinclair, Phil Rose, John Nevin, Lee Horsley, Leontine Barnett, Ken Barnett, Patrick Laher.

### **Summary**

|                    | <u>2019</u> | <u>2018</u> | <u>2017</u> | <u>2016</u> |
|--------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Total labour hours | 158.25      | 124         | 113.5       | 42.5        |

|                               |       |      |         |         |
|-------------------------------|-------|------|---------|---------|
| Number of working bees        | 14    | 7    | 10      | 4       |
| Number of shrubs planted      | 69    | 12   | 84      | 56      |
| Plants at cost, mulch, stakes | \$552 | \$78 | \$528.5 | \$338.8 |

Some species planted along paths: *Brachychiton populneus*, *Eucalyptus prava*, *forrestiana*, “Baby Blue”, *cinerea*, *citriodora*, *torquata*, *albopurpurea*, *youngiana*, *pyriformis*, *leucoxydon rosea*, *dolichorrhyncha*, *woodwardii*, *Hakea* “Pin Ball”, *bucculenta*, *francisiana*.

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## **Xanthorrhoea Flowering and Fire**

by John Nevin

In recent years there has been increased interest in the role of fire in plant physiology. Prof. Kingsley Dixon led much smoke related research, and under his supervision, one of his PhD students isolated the chemical in smoke that promotes germination of many Australian plants.

This chemical was patented and licenced to the Dow Chemical Company in the USA for commercial production. Further research showed that the chemical was carcinogenic and the litigation risk with its use persuaded Dow to abandon its commercialisation.

It is not surprising at the carcinogenicity. It obviously triggers growth in biological situations and the possibility of triggering uncontrolled growth of cells in the human situation thus causing cancer had to be a risk. The association of inhaling smoke with lung cancer is now well known, and perhaps this product of burning cellulose is the carcinogen – or there may be other chemicals that are also carcinogenic.

The failure to industrialise this research has not stopped the use of smoke in horticulture. It is easy to produce smoked water and our group has had workshops in the production of it. It has been used widely to promote the germination of many Australian plants, such as Flannel Flowers.

The association of bushfires with the subsequent flowering of Xanthorrhoeas has been observed for many years. A regular burn was thought to protect the plants from termite and caterpillar attack. It also helps the germination of Xanthorrhoea seeds.

Some nine years ago at the ANPS conference in Victoria, a tour of the Mornington Peninsula was scheduled. This had been eighty per cent burnt out the previous year. Despite the reduction in the plants on show, the display of the flowering Xanthorrhoeas and Fire Orchids (*Pyrrhorchis nigricans*) was memorable.

Maria Hitchcock showed a few years ago that pouring smoked water onto grasstrees stimulated flowering about a month later. With a couple of open gardens at our place, I put smoked water onto my grasstrees about a month beforehand. This has rewarded us with a display of flowering in about half the plants. This has been the only time that they have flowered.

With the recent incineration of the East Coast of Australia, we have been enveloped with bushfire smoke on a daily basis that often reduced visibility to 100 metres. I was pleasantly surprised to find three species of Xanthorrhoea producing flower spikes, presumably in response to the smoke exposure. The species involved are *Xanthorrhoea glauca*, *australis* and *johnsonii*. *Xanthorrhoea quadrangulata* has not responded.

So, like Patrick, you may get a pleasant surprise this season to find your grasstrees flowering, an unexpected result of the very distressing fires we are experiencing.



**Mass flowering of  
Grass Trees after a  
bushfire has gone  
through a reserve**



Examples of the Xanthorrhoes  
flowering in the garden in  
response to smoke exposure  
from remote bushfires.

*Xanthorrhoea glauca* above L

*Xanthorrhoea australis* above R

*Xanthorrhoea johnsonii* L

## Local Effects of the Bushfires

by John Nevin

I recently spent a day at Torrington to explore the effect of the bushfire there. Over the years, Torrington has regularly had major bushfires, but the one just before Christmas was huge and catastrophic with about a dozen homes burnt down. In the week following the fire, there was a localised 120 mm fall of rain one night at the western end of the Torrington area.

I started with the eastern side at Torrington village. The fire spared the village of Stannum but had gotten into Torrington village with several houses burnt to the ground on the western side. The fires seemed to have concentrated on property protection in the face of a maelstrom and had saved most buildings in the township.

All around the township was burnt and Merricks Picnic area was burnt out and inaccessible due to multiple large fallen trees across the track in. I tried Silent Grove Road to the west. This was closed about one Km along due to trees across the road from the fire. Much work had been done to clear these for about ten metres on either side of the road. I ventured past to explore further. The road to Mystery Face was closed due to tree falls across the road and extensively burnt out. I could get no further than about one Km from the turnoff to Blatherarm, but the whole area was burnt out.

I went back and explored the extensive rock shelves behind Torrington Village. These were also burnt out and not the usual refuges offered from fires. In particular, the areas I knew for *Phebalium glandulosum* and *Leionema rotundifolium* that are both rare and endangered were totally burnt out. The site for the pink form of *Prostanthera teretifolia* was gone. There were a few survivors of the *Prostanthera* here and there, but very few.

I drove via the Emmaville Road to Emmaville and Torrington was charred all the way to the edges. Heading up Gulf Road to the west of Torrington State Conservation area, the whole way was burnt out as far as the eye could see both east and west. Eventually, about three Km from the end of the road my way was blocked by a huge tree across the road.

Conclusion? Torrington is gone is a big way from east to west and it will be ages for it to recover. Even then the recovery may be incomplete. It will be interesting to visit periodically to see what does come back.

It is concerning the extent of the fire damage across the Northern Tablelands. Torrington is gone; Goonowigall Nature Reserve is burnt out; Cathedral Rock National Park is gone; Washpool has been burnt out and Gibraltar Range; further North the Granite Belt is badly affected. An ecological disaster on this scale seems unprecedented on the Northern Tablelands.



**Burnt out landscape at  
the back of Torrington  
Village**



**Desolate rockshelf at  
the back of  
Torrington Village**



***Eucalyptus prava* (Orange Gum)  
burnt but regenerating with  
lignotyberous and epicormic  
shoots**



**Burnt house with  
asbestos warning  
sign down  
Sherratts Lane**



Burnt out rock shelf at the back of Torrington Village where many *Leionema rotundifolium* plants used to grow in the rock crevices

An island of *Isotoma anethifolia* surviving and thriving on a burnt out rock shelf



*Isotoma anethifolia* on rock shelf Torrington



Some surviving *Kunzea bracteolata* flowering on rock shelf island at Torrington



The remains of Flagstone Creek signage where a very rich flora used to grow

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## For Your Diary

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|---------------------------|---|
| February 7 <sup>th</sup>  | Committee meeting at Sinclairs  |
| February 15 <sup>th</sup> | Forum at Cnr Markham and Barney Sts<br><b>“Insects in Your Garden”</b> by Eric Sinclair       |
| March 6-7                 | Armidale Show   |
| March 21 <sup>st</sup>    | Forum at Cnr Markham and Barney Sts<br><b>“The Rehabilitation of a Boggabri Coal Mine”</b>    |
| April 3 <sup>rd</sup>     | Committee Meeting   |
| April 18 <sup>th</sup>    | Forum at Cnr Markham and Barney Sts<br><b>“Local Natural History Collections”</b> Brett Sowby |

- May 16<sup>th</sup> Garden visits to Sinclairs and Arboretum  
With emphasis on Eremophilas.
- June 20<sup>th</sup> Solstice Luncheon - BYO  
To be held at Deirdre Water's new home at Corner of Dumaresq  
Butler Sts.
- July 18<sup>th</sup> Propagation Workshop – Growing natives from seed  
Penelope Sinclair coordinator
- August 7<sup>th</sup> Committee Meeting
- August 15<sup>th</sup> Forum at Cnr Markham and Barney Sts  
**“Encouraging birds into your garden”** - Peter Metcalfe
- September 4<sup>th</sup> Committee Meeting
- September 5<sup>th</sup> Garden visit – BYO afternoon tea
- September 26<sup>th</sup> Special Forum  
**“Australian Succulents/Xerophytes – Drought Hardy Plants”**  
Speaker Attila Kapitany
- October 2<sup>nd</sup> Committee Meeting
- October 17-18 Excursion to Barrington Tops  
John Nevin and Phil Rose organisers
- November 7<sup>th</sup> Propagation Workshop – Growing native plants from cuttings  
Maria Hitchcock coordinator
- November 21<sup>st</sup> AGM and **“Working with Greening Australia”** Ken Waters
- December 5<sup>th</sup> Christmas Party
- December 11<sup>th</sup> Planning Meeting for 2021 at Armidale Tree Group
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