



Newsletter of Menai Wildflower Group

March 2024

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Welcome 2024 committee

Our AGM saw some new faces in “management” with the election of Anthony Jackson as President and John Prats as Secretary. Thank you both for taking on these responsibilities. Once again Jan has volunteered to keep track of finances; we appreciate your efforts, and Marion continues in promotion and distribution. Cameron (Communications Officer) and Annie are doing a fantastic job expanding our digital content, in particular the website and Instagram account. Check out their efforts to keep up with what’s going on at MWG. Also, on our committee are Helen and Matt. Lloyd and Mary’s planned move to Canberra will leave a big gap so we all need to support these elected officials.

The committee would greatly appreciate your help with all sorts of jobs. If you see a request for help, please don’t assume that someone else will do it. If you have a skill to offer, please let us know. Whether you can contribute once a week, once a month or only occasionally, every bit helps! We have members who can garden, propagate and cater. Some of us are great handymen, some have fantastic IT skills, some can organise activities and some are amazing networkers. Step forward to help us make 2024 successful and stress free.

G Jackson & P Forbes



Gorgeous gum at Fire Station, P Forbes.

Christmas flowers

At our November meeting, after the formal election of committee officers for the next year, member and qualified florist Helen Patience demonstrated the construction of a Christmas Log table decoration for the rapidly approaching festive season. The log was based on a slab of ‘Oasis’ (floral foam) that has been pre-soaked in water then decorated with a selection of seasonal plants and foliage.

In Helen’s demonstration these plants included:

- Grevilleas – Kings Park Grevilleas for flowers and *G. pilosa* for foliage (watch out, it’s as prickly as the holly it looks like and be careful as some people are allergic)
- Flannel flowers, they’ll last well
- Paper daisies, including Rhodanthe and Xerochrysum species
- Lilly pilli
- Billy buttons
- Kangaroo paws (the red ones look very festive)
- Christmas bush
- Salt bush foliage
- Gumnuts
- Leather fern

Some tips from Helen:

- Don’t push the Oasis into the water, allow it to slowly soak the water up.
- Start with a structure of foliage.
- Cut the stems of the plants at an angle to maximise water intake.

- Make the log as symmetric as possible.
- Don't make it so high or wide that it overfills the table or obscures guests.
- Add some small Christmas decorations or ribbon to the finished log.



Helen's finished arrangement. J Prats.

Coincidentally, on the Friday before the meeting, Gardening Australia's Clarence Slocock gave his tips for using natives in floral arrangements which you can enjoy at Perfect for Picking. The flowers he suggested for a bouquet which will be available at Christmas are:

- Banksia - there are 170 species. *B. menziesii* is good but so are other local ones you may find in your garden.
- Hakeas provide both flowers and seeds as well as foliage. *H. bucculenta* and *francisiana* are recommended. Don't cut into bare wood.
- *Pelargonium austral* (Austral Storksbill)
- Geraldton Wax
- Teatree
- Eucalypt foliage such as Argyle Apple (*Eucalyptus cinerea*)
- Grasses like *Themeda triandra*

Our thanks go to Helen for the wonderful demonstration of the flower arrangers' art.

Greg Jackson

Holiday reading

The Christmas holidays are a great opportunity to catch up on reading. I've summarised some of the interesting stories I found.

First, a great story about [dingoes and the effect of the dingo fence](#)

Most of us have heard about the Dingo fence; perhaps you've watched the movie. But I was amazed by recent research that showed the environmental effect of the fence. The world's longest fence snakes through Queensland, NSW and SA for 5,600 kilometres. Unlike lines on the

map such as state boundaries, the dingo proof fence can be seen on the ground because of its impact on humans, animals, and plants. It is aimed at keeping dingoes out of the grazing lands of the south east and by the 1950s it cut off about one third of the continent.

Dingoes arrived in Australia between 3,000 and 5,000 years ago, probably with people from Asia and became important to Aboriginal people. They also disrupted the environment; for example, they probably led to the extinction of the thylacine (Tasmanian Tiger) on the mainland. But the modern removal of dingoes has again changed life inside the fence significantly.



Dingo on K'gari. P Forbes.

The environment outside the fence has more biodiversity with more small native mammals like the mulgara and fewer kangaroos, causing a different array of plants. The difference in ground cover means that the sand dunes are shaped differently and when it rains, the land on the dingo side of the fence stays greener for longer. Inside the fence, kangaroos flourish with the sheep as well as introduced predators like cats and dogs, disadvantaging many indigenous species. So top predators have once again been shown to be crucial elements in the ecosystem and with climate change making some areas unsuitable for grazing sheep, perhaps it's time to retract the fence and look at alternate controls, like guardian sheep dogs (Maremma) which have successfully protected sheep in Queensland.

For more, see Zoe Kean's article for Australia's Wild Odyssey, available at ABC Science.

And for another charismatic animal story, you can find out a bit more about numbats and the threat posed to them by climate change [here](#).

Victorian Zoos has developed [innovative technology programs](#) in an effort to cope with the challenges of recent bushfires, floods and land clearing. One example is a new monitor to assess the heartbeat and oxygenation of tiny Mountain pygmy possum which we all know of from the APS visits to Charlottes Pass. These beautiful

creatures are now critically endangered owing to the impact of droughts, cats, foxes and a reduction in their food resource, the Bogong Moth.



Pygmy Possum, L Hedges.

Other programs involve drones for habitat survey to help with vegetation management and landscape restoration and for wildlife support after disasters like drought or fires. Those who remember Zena Warrior Princess will be tickled with the Zoo Emergency Nutrition by Air (ZENA) system which delivers much-needed food to affected wildlife efficiently, across a wide area, at a very short notice and low cost.

More of this in an article by Nate Woodall, again on the ABC News website.

The caves of the Nullarbor Plain have given us evidence of past through fossils of extinct animals which have become trapped in the caves in their search for water. Now scientists have gathered more evidence of [past climate and development of Australian plants](#) by examining the pollen stuck in stalagmites and stalactites in the caves. This reveals that three and five million years ago, The Nullarbor (no tree) Plain was once covered by lush forest of gum trees (*Eucalyptus* and *Corymbia*), banksias and other flowering plants now found exclusively on Australia's east coast. This was the last time Earth's climate was as warm as it is expected to be 100 years from now, and a warmer Southern Ocean made the Nullarbor Plain two to four times wetter than today.

The speleothems were dated by measuring the relative amounts of tiny quantities of lead versus uranium that accumulate from radioactive decay in the speleothem. The researchers identified pollen from the small number of dated speleothems which contained some, revealing the nature of the vegetation on the Nullarbor when the speleothems were growing.

More than five million years ago, the climate was dry, although not as dry as today and the

vegetation was dominated by *Casuarina* (she-oaks) and *Gyrostemonaceae* (Bell- or wheel-fruits) rather than the saltbush that characterises the modern landscape. But the increasingly wetter climate around five million years ago transformed the area to woodland or forest with some plants now found only in eastern Australia.

This interruption to Australia's long-term drying trend is important to understanding how arid-adapted ecosystems evolved and the relationship between moisture-demanding plants and animals now confined to either the east or west coasts.

More information can be found at all these sites - <https://www.unimelb.edu.au/newsroom/news/2016/february/the-nullarbor-plains-ancient-forests-revealed> and <https://www.abc.net.au/news/science/2023-04-19/nullarbor-plain-desert-iron-oxide-dating-forest-sand-minerals/102231586>

There is a number of citizen science projects you can get involved in. If you've been enjoying a holiday on the coast, why not become a [beach monitor](#) and help understand and hopefully protect your favourite beach.

And you can see the results of last year's Christmas beetle survey or get involved in next year's count [here](#). Christmas beetles (*Anoplognathus* spp) are iconic Australian insects (35 different species of a kind of Scarab beetle) which emerge in early spring and, in the past at least, flew around in huge numbers at Christmas. But while the large, colourful beetles used to be seen in their millions, numbers seem to be in decline. Sydney University scientists are running a citizen science project to track the population of beetles.



Christmas beetle, P Forbes.

If you are walking, remember to keep your eyes open as new species turn up everywhere – “*Grevillea Bypassii*” for example. Jan found this interesting article on a rare [minature violet](#) (*Viola improcera*) found by walkers in Tasmania. Using another citizen science platform, iNaturalist, the walkers uploaded photographs and details of this

interesting finds which experts then reviewed, finding that it had never been recorded before in Tasmania. The platform compensates for the limited fieldwork available to scientists and allows the public to get accurate IDs of plants and animals.



Our local native violet, P Forbes.

Another observant walker has excited horticulturists with a [purple flowering form](#) of *Banksia spinulosa*. Horticulturists from IndigiGrow collected cuttings to propagate but it will be a few years before it is known whether the flower colour is caused by genetic variation rather than due to local conditions. It will be a beautiful addition to garden plantings if they can successfully propagate it.



Image of plant from ABC News, supplied by Gerard Nicol.

And if you have been lazing around all holidays reading and are now thinking of getting fit again, you'll be happy to hear that [recent studies](#) suggest you don't need pain for gain. Another amazing fact is that you apparently build more muscle, and increase bone density more, going down stairs than up.

Editor

Coming events

Please keep an eye out for last minute **variations**. Meetings are on the **second Saturday** of the month at **2pm**.

- 10 Feb** **Rhonda Jackson** will tell us about the wonderful **Western Australian wildflowers** she saw on her 2023 trip.
- 2 Mar** **Open Day** at fire station, still being finalised.
- 9 Mar** **Narelle Happ** will introduce **edible Australian plants**. Narelle's previous presentation from several years ago was very interesting, particularly as suitable plants for our area are available from our nursery and the Heathcote Nursery.
- 13 Apr** Topic **TBA**.
- 11 May** **Growing Ground Orchids** with **Richie Dimon**.

Keep in contact

You can now keep up to date with MWG activities on the [NSW APS website](#), at [our Facebook page](#), and via Instagram.

Editor

Importance of Wetlands recognised

NPA's latest newsletter noted that World Wetlands Day was 2 February, the date of the adoption of the Convention on Wetlands in 1971, in the Iranian city of Ramsar (I always wondered about what Ramsar stood for). This year's theme is wetlands and human wellbeing. As well as being a source of clean water, human food sources and wildlife habitats, wetlands are beautiful, fascinating places where we can appreciate nature and enjoy recreation. More about wetlands is available at [The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands](#), [World Wetlands Day 2024](#) and [Internationally significant wetlands of NSW](#)

We hope to offer members a walk around the wetlands of Oatley Park and Saltpan Creek later in the year so keep your eyes open for further information.

Graeme's Orchids

Hello everyone. Hope you had a great Christmas. Now the New Year has been a surprise weatherwise. OK, we've had a few very hot days but more overcast days with a bit of rain as well. **PLUS HUMIDITY**.

I'm not complaining about it actually. Sure a few more sunny days would have been great but overall I'm having a very active growing season. No flowers yet of course but plenty of good strong growth. I've included a couple of photos of my shadehouse at the moment to give you some idea.



Denrobium speciosum var. *blackdownense* PLUMES, with purplish new canes, G Davies.

Denrobium spp. var. *blackdownense* PLUMES is a Queensland variety with unusual coloured canes. At the moment, there are at least six new canes in various stages of development. Certainly, a good start to the year. Note the purplish colour of the new canes which is a quirk of variety *blackdownense* - no one seems to know why. But if you ever see a *D. speciosum*, either canes or young leaves, with that colour in them, you're looking at a variety *blackdownense* or a cross with that variety in it. As the plants mature however the purple in canes and leaves reverts to *D. speciosum* green.

Denrobium speciosum var. *curvicaule* (CATHU x self) is another Queensland variety and has a similar new spike count as PLUMES. Should look great in spring if I can keep them slug/snail and other pest free.



Denrobium spp. Den. spec. var. *curvicaule* CATHU x self, G Davies.



Flourishing greenhouse with lots of new growth, G Davies.

As for the rest of my plants, in the main they are doing well. Certainly, there is a nice new apple green colour as you look over them at the moment thanks to all the new growth. So come on spring!

Graeme Davies

Billy Buttons and others

Working at the Tip Nursery is educational and satisfying as well as being a lot of fun. It's great to look at all our "baby" plants, ready for valuable regeneration projects but recently I have also tried propagating some natives from seed for the garden. I bought seeds from Bunnings, RBG and a specialist supplier online, and launched into Paper

Daisies (*Rhodanthe chlorocephala* and *Xerochrysum* (ex *Helichrysum*) spp, Swan River Daisies (*Brachyscome iberidifolia*) and Billy Buttons (*Pycnosorus globosus*). Coincidentally, Matt had the same idea at the Fire Station nursery. All the seeds had a good germination rate and you may have seen some examples at the Fire Station garden, or on our sale tables.

The difference between the habits of the Paper Daisies surprised me. The *Rhodanthe* plants are small and slender with just one pink flower on each stem. You need to keep them vigorously growing by planting them up into the right size pot or their final position in the garden before they become root bound. Also, the trick for a good display is to plant densely. They don't need too much care in the way of further fertiliser but mine did need frequent water. The *Xerochrysum* on the other hand grow to a bushy plant which can be planted less densely although they do make a good display in a bunch. My experience is that they are slower to reach maturity and once again needed a bit of water to keep them going. Please note that although I did improve it a little, my "soil" is really water-repellent sand and rocks. I planted the *Xerochrysum* seed relatively late but next time I'll try to get the seeds in in September or better still plant them both in the autumn so they can establish over the cooler weather.

The Billy Buttons grew to soft, silvery, almost grass-like clumps of foliage although they are in the daisy family and I enjoyed watching the flowers' development. Again, on Lloyd's advice, I put 2-3 in a 30cm pot and have had 2 flowers so far – both were snapped off, I suspect by cockies, but they did look good.



Billy Button, P Forbes.

The Swan River Daisies were planted just before Christmas so I am still waiting for flowers but the plants look healthy and were numerous enough to be distributed to family and friends. They make a good groundcover with ferny foliage and pretty blue-purple daisy flowers. They are also available for sale.

More information at NSW APS on [Billy Buttons](#), [Swan River Daisies](#).

All members are welcome to use our nursery for their propagation projects. We won't do it for you but will provide enthusiastic and experienced advice, plus the equipment that makes it easier. Check out the nursery news section for details.

P Forbes

News from the nurseries

The Compound Nursery at the IRFS is still producing. We have had some good success with cuttings of the Golden Penda aka *Xanthostemon chrysanthus*. We have grown this great tree from the Queensland rainforests from cuttings. It can remain shrub sized for a long time. It needs a warm moist site in improved soils in Sydney with a deep mulch to keep the roots cool. This plant is one of Pam P's favourites, introduced to her by Peter Olde and she won a "Highly Commended" for her entry of one at the RAS.



Xanthostemon chrysanthus, L Hedges.

Another success we have had in recent times is growing the Wiry Honey Myrtle, which is perhaps *Melaleuca nematophylla*, from seed. The problem with growing from seed is that it is a long slow process and requires attention as the initially tiny seedlings can become overrun with weeds very quickly. The other problem is that the initial seedlings look nothing like the adult. They have large soft flat leaves whereas the adult leaves are firm and narrow terete. It is easy to think that the

young plants are an invading flat weed and pull them out. This plant is a stunner when young but becomes old and hoary with age.

Lastly, at the moment our *Actinotus forsythii* or the Pink Flannel Flower are flowering well. After two poor years when rain at the wrong times caused so many problems it is good to see this year's crop in full flower, hopefully to be followed by plenty seed which we badly need.



Pink Flannel Flowers at Fire Station, P Forbes.

Work at the nursery on Tuesday combines with the maintenance of the IRFS gardens and the mounds project. At the moment Anthony, Cameron, Tony Porritt, John P and Marion P with Jan and Matt, when he is not working, are Tuesday regulars but there is a lot to do and so more help would be welcome.

Cameron and I have been placing name tags on the plants to give any members of the community interested in native plants a chance to see what they look like in the ground before they buy them.



One of the new name tags, L Hedges.

I am sure it will be of benefit to our members as well.

The Tip nursery is very active. At the moment we are growing 10,000 plants for the greater Sydney Land Council's autumn planting. We have plenty of volunteers on hand to help out including Marian, Greg, Pam and Joanne and plenty more thanks to Adrian and his OFF colleagues. We have donated plants for their projects. Check out [Adrian's conservation efforts](#) with Oatley Flora and Fauna. This project with Greater Sydney Landcare is similar to those MWG is involved in.

L Hedges



Congratulations Lloyd on another award for your contribution to the community. This one was from the IRF for looking after the garden so thanks too to helpers Anthony, Cameron, Tony P, John P and Marion P, Jan and Matt

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