



## WILDFLOWER SOCIETY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA (Inc)

### History of the Wildflower Society of Western Australia

There had long been interest in the outstanding local flora from early colonial days with many of the established rural families having maintained fond memories of our bushland flowers.

Into the twentieth century, wildflower exhibits were the norm for country agricultural shows and in 1926, the WA Naturalists Club (founded only two years before) exhibited wildflowers during Perth Royal Show week.

When wholesale land development and new urbanisation really took off with the advent of the bulldozers following World War II, local interest in the future of bushland plants turned to alarm. The 1950s and 1960s saw enormous land clearing schemes. On the marginal sandplain country between Albany and Esperance, governments of the day promised to clear a million acres of bushland each year for agricultural production. This policy, perhaps more than any other factor, eventually led to the formation of the wildflower interest group we know today.

Another influential factor was the publication of several local wildflower reference books in the 1950s: Rica Erickson's *Orchids of the West* in 1951 and *Triggerplants* in 1958; and the first two volumes of the landmark Blackall & Grieve "How to Know Western Australian Wildflowers" (in 1954 and 1956).

### The Movement Starts...

Western Australia was not alone with its concern for the disappearing native flora. In March 1957, the inaugural meeting of the Society for Growing Australian Plants was held in Melbourne. This was followed by a tour of Australia to promote this interest group by inspiring founder Mr Al Swaby.

Swaby's visit to Perth heightened local awareness which inspired foundation of the South West Regional council of the 'Society for Growing Australian Natives'. With the inaugural meeting held on 18th March 1958, retired forester Les O'Grady was elected President. Within a year the group's title changed to WA Wildflower Growers Association which became an incorporated body in February 1960 (conjunct with a very active camera club whose members specific interest was photographing local wildflowers).

The group's foundation years were difficult because authorities and society in general regarded people interested in native plants with some derision. Fate and public awareness were soon to change, however, by the timely advent of a wildflower mural on the Commonwealth Bank building in Perth and later vehicle registration plates referring to WA as 'The Wildflower State'.

### ...And Gathers Momentum

The establishment of several native plant nurseries also fostered local interest and by the late 1960s the growing of your very own wildflowers was gathering momentum. By that time, the general public began to consider wildflowers seriously and the subsequent groups grew from strength to strength.

The Perth wildflower group was joined by the Armadale-Kelmscott group (in 1961) and Albany (1963). These three years were also significant with dynamic president Mrs Judy Hamersley gathering political influence for the fledgling 'movement' and by the end of 1963 boasted 250 financial members and a quarterly newsletter that is now (2016) in its 54th year of continuing publication.

The following year (1964) was indeed a landmark year with the group's name being changed to WA Wildflower Society (Inc.) and the publication of the first edition of Hints on Growing Native Plants. Public awareness was also enhanced by the establishment of the Kings Park botanical garden and the inaugural Kings Park Wildflower Show. Further into the 1960s saw formations of branches at Collie, Geraldton and Northam.

By the 1970s there were some 500 members enjoying organised botanical excursions into the more favourable wildflower locations. The 70s also heralded conservation awareness and the establishment of the Environmental Protection Authority in 1971.

## Controversies

The Wildflower Society subsequently participated vigorously in the escalating controversies centred around mining, conserving native flora and fauna, the 'great woodchip debate', and numerous issues centred on the establishment of reserves and national parks.

The selling of local plant seeds became a major interest for the Society, and provided much needed revenue especially after relinquishment of this service by Kings Park. The seed selling exercise was for many years coordinated by Honor Venning.

The mid-70s saw a massive increase in membership and interest under successive leaderships of Mrs Magda Wittwer and Dr Neville Marchant, who took advantage of water restrictions imposed after several years of low rainfall when it became fashionable to replace lawns with native plants.

## More Branches Form

This phase also saw the formation of the Eastern Hills and Darling Range branches with total Society membership topping 600 for the first time. In 1978 Perth meetings required a larger venue to accommodate as many as 350 at general meetings!

In August/September 1977, the WA Wildflower Society hosted the ninth national conference of the Society for Growing Australian Plants (SGAP) at Kings Park. In June the following year Perth branch hosted the first State Conference with discussions on branch status and possibilities of a Regional Council, (this did not eventuate until 12 years later). ASGAP conferences are now shared between the "regions" (states and territories). WA hosted the national conference again in 1991 and 2005.

Into the 1980s, the conservation movement was coming to terms with the EPA's 'Red Book' recommendations for which it was most important the Society and other conservation groups ensure the Government honoured any declared and undeclared commitments to nature and conservation reserves, in 1982 the Minister for Lands was urged not to open up more marginal land for farming without concern for flora reserves.

John Colwill's presidency was followed by three year terms of Claire Welsh and then Marion Blackwell in what could be described as the consolidating era of the 1980s. This era saw the formation of the Northern Suburbs Branch and, very late in the decade, the establishment of the Murdoch Branch. Leading into the 90s, the major environmental concern was the battle to reserve the botanical rich Mt. Lesueur area as a national park.

## **Formalising the structure**

There remained, however, interest in formalising the Society into an organisation acceptable at both State and Branch level. This momentum, which was begun in Don Wignall's presidency, was carried through to further fruition during Tom Alford's term. The resultant Management Committee has been functioning since 1990.

The Management Committee has achieved quite a few landmarks for the Society. It provides a well-coordinated front to conservation issues; it conducts extensive community based bushland surveys, especially the Swan Coastal Plain; it provided impetus for valuable volunteer assistance at the WA Herbarium; it provided finance for publishing "Grieve part II" (How to Identify WA Wildflowers); and it initiated what should be destined to become the most comprehensive botanical database in Australia. Importantly, the Society's headquarters at Perry House provides a focus for our activities.