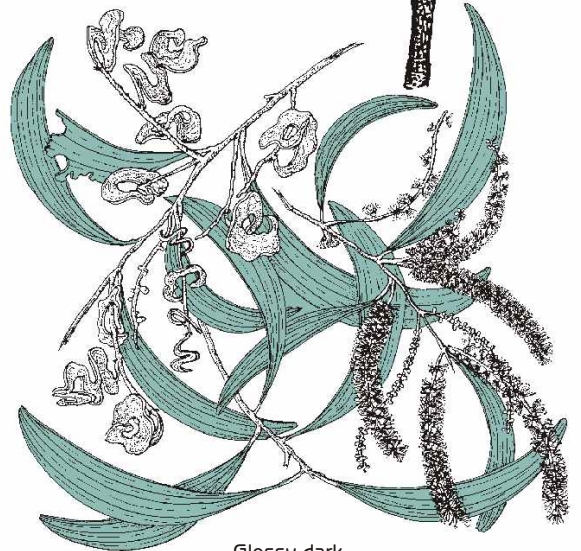


R Nature Notes

Junior Ranger

BLACK WATTLE - OUR UNSUNG HERO

It's time we sung the praises of one of the Top Ends most heroic plants! Whenever the bush suffers a catastrophe, whether it is a cyclone, a devastating fire, or a bulldozer, the Black Wattle, *Acacia auriculiformis*, is one of the first plants to come back. Their early work and sacrifice paves the way for the rest of the plants and animals to make a recovery.



Glossy dark green leaves (or phyllodes) and bright yellow flower spikes help make the Black Wattle a familiar sight around the Top End.

PIONEERS OF THE PLANT WORLD

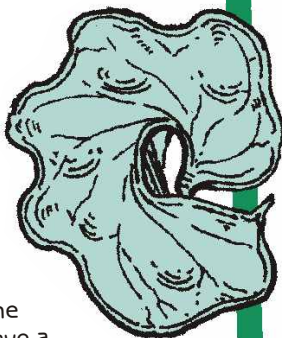
Scientists call plants that are the first to regrow in a disturbed area, **pioneer species**. Black Wattle seeds are very tough and can survive fires, floods, droughts, and even bulldozers. They can grow in extremely degraded (even poisonous) soils. The built-in 'fertiliser factories' in their roots absorb nitrogen (an important element of fertiliser) from the air, thus improving the soil for itself and other plants.

They are extremely fast growing. They can grow up to 2 metres a year and reach a height of 30 metres. Their roots are quick to hold loose sand or soil together to protect it from erosion. They also provide shade for other shade loving trees to grow underneath them.

WHAT'S IN A NAME

The common name, Black Wattle refers to the rough, black bark found on big old trees. The smooth green bark on young trees gets darker and rougher as it gets older.

The species name, *auriculiformis* comes from the Latin words *auricula*, meaning 'ear', and *forma*, meaning 'shaped'. When you look at the seed pod, you can see why the trees other nickname is Earpod Wattle. Have a look for them around August to October.



The ear-shaped seed pod of the Black Wattle.

GOODBYE OLD TIMERS

There is a price these pioneer species pay for living so fast; they die young. Black Wattles live for about 30 to 40 years. This isn't long for a big tree, but in this time they will have created conditions that will allow other species to takeover. And don't worry; they will have produced thousands of seeds that are just waiting for the next environmental disturbance.

One such disturbance occurred in Darwin on Christmas Eve, 1974 when Cyclone Tracy flattened the place. The good old Black Wattle was one of the first plants to sprout again, and they helped hold together many plant communities. People also planted them everywhere to help green up the city. But that was over 30 years ago, and now you can see many of these big old pioneers dying. Take a look around places like Holmes Jungle Nature Park and you'll see most of the really big old Black Wattles that grew after Cyclone Tracy are dead or dying and the monsoon forest species that grew up under them are now taking back over.

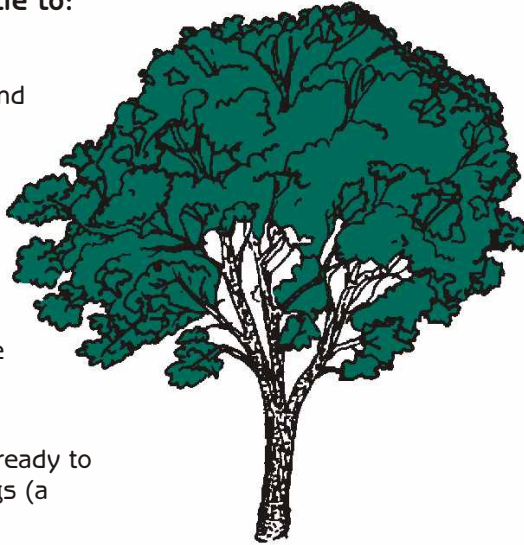
MORE USES THAN YOU CAN POKE A BLACK WATTLE STICK AT!

Aboriginal people use Black Wattle to:

- make a pain relief rub
- make axe handles, spear heads and spear throwers
- crush the seeds to use as a fish poison
- crush the pods as soap

And in the Tiwi Islands:

- dugout canoes are made from the trunk
- and they also use the flowering period to indicate that turtles are ready to hunt, and that the local Tern's eggs (a sea bird) are ready to collect

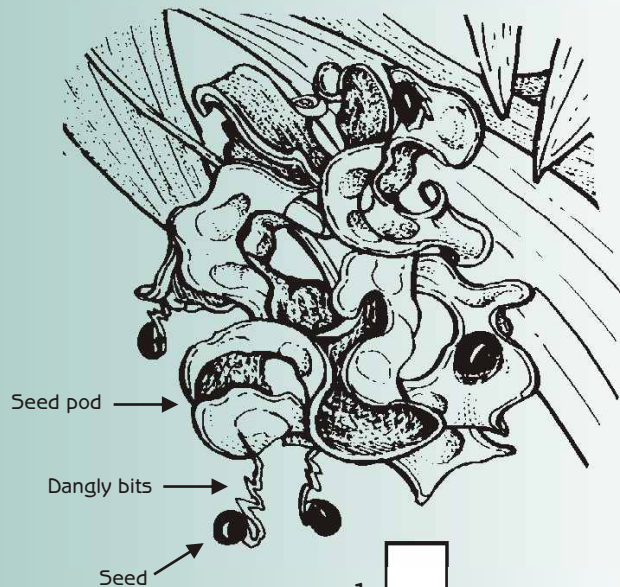


Black Wattles are planted in parts of Africa and the Asia - Pacific regions for:

- firewood
- fixing up degraded land
- making wood chip for paper pulp
- use as fast growing shade trees
- making farm tools and furniture

YUMMY DANGLY BITS!

Ripe Black Wattle seeds hang out of the seed pod attached by a fleshy yellowy-orange dangly bit. Birds and ants love to eat this dangly bit and in doing so spread the seed all over the country side. Complete this quiz and the name of this dangly bit will be revealed in the boxes. All of the answers have been mentioned in this article. Good luck!



1. The Latin word for shaped.
2. Holmes _____ Nature Park.
3. The name for plants that are the first to grow in disturbed areas.
4. Crushed Black Wattle seeds can be used to poison what?
5. The name of the cyclone that destroyed Darwin on December 25, 1974.
6. The colour of bark on an old *Acacia auriculiformis*.
7. The hard timber from Black Wattles can be used to make handles for what wood cutting tool?

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Want to learn more about Wattles?

Check out this website: www.anbg.gov.au/acacia/