

Planting Under Established Eucalypts

Adapted from an Article in the Canberra Region Journal/Dec 2003 written by Jan Simpson

One of the questions frequently asked by people new to native gardens is: what will grow well under a mature eucalypt where there is competition for soil, water, nutrients and light.

One answer of course is not to plant at all. It's perfectly possible to develop such an area into an attractive garden space making an open clearing carpeted with mulch and gravel, adding a seat and a birdbath &/or some pots or a small 'wet patch'.



The Arboretum.

If however you want to plant a garden there must be a metre plus trunk height before the first branches. The fine feeder roots will be out at the drip-line, the place at the edge of the canopy, where the water drips off the pointed tip of the 'traditional leaf'. This means the area under the canopy, that is, from the drip-line in to the trunk, will have less root competition. This is where it's possible to find pockets of soil for growing individual plants.

If, however, your garden already has a large bare patch under a eucalypt that is a prime candidate for making a new bed. Extend a nearby bed to take in any bald patch outside the border. Things will look a lot better immediately. Perhaps this means all the lawn is gone? No matter - think of the effort you will save and the decrease in the water bill. You could add some soil or compost but do not under any circumstances raise the soil level around an established tree more than 5 cm. Raising the level more than this changes the drainage, and, decreases the

amount of air and water reaching the old ground level, thereby upsetting the tree's feedings regime, and leading to disease and possible death.

Mulch is another matter, as it falls naturally in summer, when the tree decides fewer leaves mean less water used. Mulch cools the roots in summer, provides some nutrients and blankets the soil against wind and water erosion.

Another trick is to plant right close to the trunk to take advantage of the water collected on the branches and funneled back to the trunk. This is a good spot for plants that appreciate shade, dappled overhead cover, or need light frost protection. Examples are Waratahs and Boronias. Try *Boronia* 'Telopea Valley Star', *B.* 'Lorne pride', *B.* 'Sunset Serenade'. There would not be enough water for *B. megastigma* or *B. heterophylla* forms.



boronia aff pinnata

Now what type of plants? Given the small pockets of soil it probably is a good idea to stick to smallish plants such as tube stock and let them find their own way through the competition.

Pea group plants are useful as they provide some of their own food needs, through nitrogen fixing nodules on their roots. Sennas, (the Cassias that were), with yellow-golden cup flowers in late spring, are a traditional item. In Canberra use *Senna odorata* with larger compound bright green leaves and *S. arternisoides*, which has silvery-grey to grey-green leaves, with much finer leaflets.

Any of the smaller 'egg & bacon' peas also work well, starting with prostrate *Platylobium spp* and *Oxylobium spp*. Think of the banks of orange and golden peas mixed with boulders at the base of *E. pauciflora* in the Brindabellas. In Gudgenby, you have a light ground cover of *Lotus australis* and the smaller form of *Mirbelia oxylobioides*. There are *Davesia spp*, *Pultoniaea cunninghamii*, *P.* 'Glenluce Gold', *P.* 'Pyalong Pink', nearer home *P. subspicata*, *Dillwynia retorta*, *Dillwynia sericea* and many more.



Dillwynia retorta

Another suggestion would be to try *Brachysema praemorsum* prostrate forms, including the bronze leaved 'Brown Butterflies'. *Brachysema minor* should do well under trees that have a lighter canopy letting in some periods of full sun. Try too, the various forms of *Hardenbergia violacea* which must have some sun to flower well. *H.* 'Mini Ha Ha' has smaller leaves and shorter internodes, but still reaches 60-150 cm. A note of caution, *H.* 'White Wanderer', *H.* 'Happy Wanderer', and *H.* 'Free'n'Easy' are extremely vigorous and have the potential to smother small plants. Frost does cut them back but not enough!



Acacia cardiophylla

Don't forget wattles belong to the pea group too. If you have a large bed, you could try some of the big prostrate forms, (but these will need some periods of sun too), a small prostrate is *Acacia cardiophylla* 'Kuranga Gold'. *Acacia buxifolia* does well, but really needs lighter soil, or soil with rocky bits mixed in to do really well. The local *A. pycnantha* makes a lightweight tree and loves dry hillsides. The plants needing full sun equate to those on the borders - between the forest and the roads and clearings.

Take a leaf from nature and think of the dry hillsides you have seen. What grows well there? The Victorian goldfields give you *Correa reflexa* and *Grevillea alpine*, Canberra gives you *Bracteantha viscosa*, *Acacia gunnii*, *Grevillea lanigera*, *Hakea microcarpa*, *Gompholobium huegelii*, *Persoonia chamaepitys* and *Cryptandra amara* where there is some full sun. In the southern Highlands you have *Banksia spinulosa* forms happily co-existing with Eucalypts. From the damper Brindabellas comes *Grevillea dirninuta*. *Jacksonia scoparia* is a widespread small, lightweight tree with yellow, scented pea flowers. The silver leaved, orange flowered form of *Grevillea arenaria* has proved hardy locally but is more of a sunny clearing plant. *Calytrix* comes to mind and comes in shades of dark through light pink to white, from utterly prostrate through procumbent to upright and often has colourful calyxes that remain on the plant after flowering. *Philotheca myoporoides* can also be very tough.



Banksia spinulosa

Conversely, if a plant needs the well-drained spot you don't have, then plant it next to a large shrub, which will soak up most of the water. *Prostanthera phyllicifolia* is such a plant; possibly *P. gilesii* and *P. scutellarioides* certainly should fit right in.



Prostanthera scutellarioides

Jan has mentioned many more plants to try in her article so I urge you all to read the original.

There are many more plants to try but as usual make sure that you ask around and plant those that grow in our area. Actually with the microclimates that are being developed in our gardens we should be able to try almost anything. Ed! (images added from Maria's collection) NW 2013.