

AUSTRALIAN FLORA

Australia has been isolated for thousands of years and thus plants have been able to develop independently to suit the often harsh natural conditions. Due to the wide range of different environments and plant communities, the native flora of Australia is the most diverse and varied in the world, growing in tropical, rainforest, stony inland deserts, alpine meadows and sandy heathlands

One of Australia's greatest treasures is her flora – a staggering 24,000 species of native plants have been identified compared to England's 1700 native plants.

Australia's native plants vary across the many different natural environments of the country. In the tropical regions of north Queensland, Arnhem Land and the Kimberleys there are many native fruit trees, such as figs and green plums. Where water is scarce in central Australia, the plants are spread thinly over the land and Aborigines rely on fruits such as bush tomatoes and quandong or native peach. While fruits are seasonal, roots can usually be dug up all the year round. This regular digging-over of the soil meant that the whole country was, in a way, an Aboriginal garden.

Plants were used for many other things besides food. Medicines also came from plants. Native mints (*Mentha* spp.) were remedies for coughs and colds, and the gum from gum-trees, which is rich in tannin, was used for burns.

While these traditional methods of treatment are well known natural cures, Australian bush medicine, much like the bush itself is still very much a mystery. "A lot of information is lost," says Dr Evelin Tiralongo a pharmacist and expert in complementary medicine from Griffith University in Queensland. "[In Aboriginal culture], nothing is written down; instead, it's passed on through singing and dancing ceremonies, which are becoming increasingly rare." According to Evelin most Aboriginal medical treatments were derived from food. "A big part of maintaining their health was just eating right," she says. When Aboriginal people did fall sick, they used plants in a variety of ways to quell their ills. Some plants, like goat's foot, were crushed, heated and applied to the skin. Others were boiled and inhaled, and occasionally drunk. There were also saps which were directly smeared on the skin, and barks that were smoked or burned. Professor Joanne Jamie, a medicinal chemist from Macquarie University, in Sydney has compiled a database on Aboriginal plants. Many of those plants, she found, contained anti-bacterial and anti-inflammatory compound that are known to western medicine. "When plants are used in a customary way, there is a far greater success rate in them having biological activity," she says. "The plants that were used by the Aborigines are very likely to be useful to us."

