
AUSTRALIAN TREES



Trees tell stories about places. Australia has some of the tallest, oldest, fattest and most unusual trees in the world. They have changed over thousands of years, to adapt to this continent's deserts, mountains and coasts. Many have found clever ways of dealing with drought and fire.

Their leaves, flowers and seeds are food for birds, insects and mammals. Old trees have lots of hollows, which make good homes for possums, sugar gliders, birds and bees. But trees aren't just important for other animals – we need them too. What trees breathe out, we breathe in. They are a vital part of the Earth's ecosystems.

When you first stand in a forest, the trees all seem the same. But if you look more closely, they are each a little different, like people.



SPOTTED GUM

(*Corymbia maculata*)



Spotted gums are easy to spot. They are smooth to touch, but covered with dents and bumps. Every trunk is as different as a face, telling the story of how they grew. They are spotty right to the tips of their branches. But they drop their limbs as they grow. Their trunks grow taller and taller, until their leaves – or crowns – disappear out of sight.

Spotted gums shed their pinky-grey bark in thick plates, which turn orange when it rains. Underneath, the new trunk is fresh and green – but with the same dimples and lumps.

Koalas eat spotted gum leaves. Yellow-tailed black cockatoos and pale-headed rosellas feast on the seeds inside their gumnuts, and flying foxes, gliders, lorikeets, friarbirds, honeyeaters and bees all come for their cream flowers.

Spotted gums grow in great forests along the east coast, from Queensland to Victoria. ‘Old Blotchy’, a spotted gum in Murrumbidgee National Park in New South Wales, is 60 metres high and ten metres around the base. ‘Old Blotchy’ is 500 years old, which must be why she has so many wrinkles.





COASTAL SHE-OAK

(*Casuarina equisetifolia*)



She-oaks have long green needles. These are not their leaves but little branches. The real leaves are in a tiny whorl at the end of each branchlet. Coastal she-oaks' Latin name means 'horse hair' because their drooping branchlets look like a horse's tail.

Coastal she-oaks have grey furrowed bark. In forests they grow into a medium-sized tree. On beaches and cliffs they are stunted and twisted from the salty spray. The wind makes music with she-oaks, whooshing and whispering through their branches. Fallen needles make a crunchy brown carpet beneath the trees.

Male and female coastal she-oak flowers grow on the same tree. The female flowers are small and red, and the male flowers are rusty-orange clumps at the tips of the needles. The wind passes pollen between them. Their fruit is a spiky wooden cone. The single seed inside has a wing, so it can spin safely to the ground – if it makes it that far ...

Coastal she-oak seeds are the main food for glossy black cockatoos. They turn up just in time for harvest, crunching cones with their big beaks and making a mess on the forest floor. Because of tree-clearing, glossy black cockatoos are now endangered. We can help by planting coastal she-oaks in our gardens.







MORETON BAY FIG

(*Ficus macrophylla*)



Moreton Bay figs are named after Moreton Bay, near Brisbane. They grow up to 60 metres and their branches and roots can spread out as wide as they are high. They are known for their massive roots, called buttress roots.

Their round, green fruit turn purple as they ripen. Like all fig trees, the flowers are *inside* the fruit. Where there are figs, there are fig wasps. The fig's fruit can only be pollinated by fig wasps, and fig wasps can only lay their eggs in fig flowers.

The tree's figs are a feast for green catbirds, wompoo fruit-doves, topknot pigeons, the rose-crowned fruit-dove, figbirds, regent bowerbirds, satin bowerbirds, Lewin's honeyeaters and grey-headed flying-foxes.

In the rainforest, birds drop fig seeds in the branch of another tree. The fig sends its roots down the host tree's trunk, until they reach the ground. Over time, the Moreton Bay fig grows larger and larger, until it strangles the host tree, leaving the fig tree standing on its own.

The canopy of the 'Children's Tree' in Sydney's Royal Botanic Garden covers 50 metres, and its trunk is fifteen metres around. The 'Dragon Tree' in Moore Park, Sydney, is named for the twisting and turning shape of its roots and branches.

