

GRASS TREES or YACCA

Xanthorrhoea species

Derivation of names

Xanthorrhoea from Greek

xanthos - yellow

rheo - I flow, referring to the yellow gum (resin) which flows from the stem.

The trees

Xanthorrhoea is a genus of flowering plants native to Australia. There are 28 species and five subspecies of *Xanthorrhoea*. They are commonly known as Grass Trees or Yacca (in South Australia). All are perennials and many, but not all species develop an above ground stem. This is rough-surfaced, built from accumulated leaf-bases around the secondarily thickened trunk. The trunk is sometimes unbranched, some species will branch if the growing point is damaged and others naturally grow numerous branches.

Flowers are borne on a long spike above a bare section called a scape, the total length can be up to four metres in some species. Flowering occurs in a distinct flowering period, which varies for each species. Flowering can be stimulated by bushfire, in which case it occurs in the next flowering period after the fire.

It is commonly believed that the *Xanthorrhoea* grow at a rate of about 25 mm per century. They do grow very slowly, but this is a gross underestimate. After an initial establishment phase the average rate of growth varies for each species but can be as high as about 25 mm per year. Thus a five metre tall member of one of the fastest growing *Xanthorrhoea* would be about 200 years old. A slow one may be some 600 years old.

Common Names

The best known common name for the *Xanthorrhoea* is blackboy. This name refers to the assumed similarity in appearance of the trunked species to an Aboriginal boy holding an upright spear. Some people now consider this name to be offensive, or at least belonging to the past, preferring instead grasstree. In South Australia it is commonly known as yacca or yakka, probably from a South Australian Aboriginal language (mostly likely Kurna).

South Australian Species

There are seven species growing in South Australia, of which three are endemic. They are:

- Mt Lofty Grass Tree (*Xanthorrhoea quadrangulata*), which has a trunk growing to 2 metres and with 1 to 2 mm square section leaves up to 1 metre long and tall flower heads to 70 cms. It is common to northern South Australia with some statuesque specimens in the Northern Flinders Ranges.



Mt Lofty grass tree

- Tufted Grass Tree (*Xanthorrhoea semiplana*), which rarely has a trunk of any significance. The leaves are very long (to 2 metres) are a flattened triangle in cross section, about 10 mm wide. They have very long flower stems - up to 5 metres. These are very common in the Adelaide Hills and throughout much of the South-east.



tufted grass tree

- Tates Grass Tree. (*Xanthorrhoea tateana*).
This species is very similar in form to *X Semiplana* except that it develops a tall trunk to 4 metres high. It is the most common form growing on Kangaroo Island and for many years provided an industry in collecting and refining Yacca Gum. This was stopped by the Commonwealth Government in 1997, however a Declaration of an Approved Wildlife Trade Operation (as seen on the net) allows harvesting of up to 150 tonnes of Yacca gum per annum until 2010. Yacca gum is derived from resin which flows from the point where the leaf base joins the trunk. Yacca Gum has been exported as an ingredient in explosive manufacture and is still used to manufacture fireworks. It has been used in the manufacture of polishes, stains and varnishes.

Aboriginal uses of Grass Tree

Xanthorrhoea is important to the Aboriginal people who live where it grows. The flowering spike makes the perfect fishing spear shafts and firesticks. It is also soaked in water and the nectar from the flowers gives a sweet tasting drink. In the bush the flowers are used as a compass. This is because flowers on the warmer, sunnier side of the spike (usually the north facing side) often open before the flowers on the cooler side facing away from the sun. The resin from *Xanthorrhoea* plants is used in spear-making and is an invaluable adhesive for Aboriginal people, often used to patch up leaky coolamons (water-containers) and even yidaki (didgeridoos).

Xanyorrhoea as a wood

They are related to the grasses and definitely not a wood. The harder "woody" sections are limited to the base of the trunks, the remainder of which simply collapses as dead leaf stalks as they dry out. Thus what may start out as a 2 metre trunk may only provide a short piece of woody material with a triangular section at the base.



a bowl turned from grass tree

The woody parts are difficult to work as they tend to crack as they first dry out. They are very dirty objects to turn as they have no true woody structure and do create a lot of dust when turning. Because of the dust, which is very fine and may be carcinogenic, health precautions are very necessary when working all Grass trees. However the results are usually interesting and very rewarding.

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