

# The simplest guide to Australian natives in your home garden

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<http://aussiegreenthumb.com>

Australia has some of the most amazing and unique native plants of anywhere in the world. Our natural assets set us apart from the pack, and the plants available to us are some of the toughest and easiest to grow.

Need a stunning looking plant that won't mind if you forget to water it, or one that doesn't need any TLC like fertilising and pruning? Well then keep on reading, because there is most definitely an Australian native that will tick all your boxes! Here is a super simple guide to using Australian natives in your home garden.



## Why grow natives?

The number one reason most people grow natives in their home garden, is because they're obviously so well suited to our climate and conditions. The majority of Australia experiences long dry spells, and has pretty poor quality soil, yet we have forests and grass

lands full of amazing colourful, fragrant and vibrant species. This is because most of our natives have evolved to survive in these conditions that most others would not. This is great for us gardeners, because it makes our job so much easier! Drought tolerant plants that don't need to be drowned in water every summers day, and plants that can go a lifetime with virtually no fertilising or pruning; how can you say no to that!

Using Australian natives in your garden are also better for your local environment. Not only will they provide habitat and food for native birds, animals, and insects, which will boost the overall ecology in your area, the reduced use of irrigation and fertilisers will benefit your local waterways too!

Using less water to irrigate means more saved for important stuff, like drinking, and not using fertilisers means that less of this is likely to run down drains and into creeks and streams, which can cause invasive weed outbreaks and poison delicate aquatic communities.

Australian natives are also a great source of food! The traditional owners of our country couldn't just pop down to the supermarket to pick up their dinner, so they relied heavily on what was available around them. There are a great deal of edible Australian natives that can easily be grown in your backyard. So next time you think about your veggie patch, consider doing some research into bush tucker plants, and try using some tougher Australian natives suited to your area (and of course your tastes).



### Breaking natives down.

In general terms, we can break down the different types of native plant species into 3 groups; Ground covers; grasses and sedges; and shrubs and trees.

Each group has different benefits and uses in the home garden, which you should consider before you go throwing them into your yard.

### Ground covers and climbers.

As the name suggests, these are plants that grow along the ground or climb up things. Most ground covers grow on the top layer of the soil they sit on and have a large underground root network, though I personally also include prostrate varieties of species in this group (Plants that grow sideways rather than up).

Climbers can be trained up trees or walls. These are great for big bulky areas where you want to cover some space. Climbers like hardenbergia violacea and hibbertia scandens are great colourful climbers that are super tough. There are also several native clematis

species which can provide great smothering coverage with incredible white flowers.



*Hardenbergia violacea* is a lovely little climber with purple flowers



*Commelina cyanea* and *Hibbertia scandens* mixed together

When it comes to ground covers, I think Australian natives are some of the best out. *Viola hederacea* and *dichondra repens* are great as [lawn alternatives](#) or planted amongst pavers or stone walkways. *Pratia* varieties and *Wahlenbergia stricta* are two other amazing ground cover with super cute little flowers.



*Viola hederacea* is a great flowering groundcover



*dichondra repens* is an amazing ground cover, but doesn't do much flowering.

There's also the option for prostrate growing varieties of your favourite shrubs, like grevillea, acacia and callistemons. These are best used as low flowering shrubs in the front of your gardens, so you can get the benefits, without blocking out everything behind.

### Grasses and sedges

Australia has some of the best native grass and sedge species available for use in your home garden. These can be clumping plants like lomandra, pennisetum and themeda australis, which can fill in blank spaces, cover ugly spots, as well as add texture and colour to areas. They can also include lawn alternatives, such as microlaena stipoides which makes for an amazingly soft and drought tolerant lawn. The last use for these type of plants is for filling in trouble spots in your garden. A lot of sedges and grasses are super tough and can grow in areas that many other species can't.

*Ficinia nodosa*, and *Carex appressa* are two great looking sedges that will handle the wettest problem spot in your garden. These are also great plants to use for some natural biofiltration of waterways you may have on your property. They can help catch leaves and other junk before it washing down drains, and can even catch and help remove any bad chemicals or fertilisers before they get into the waterways.

A lot of native grasses are now sold in sterile varieties. This is a good idea if you want a few feature spots in your garden, rather than a sprawling native meadow.



*Lomandra longifolia* is an indestructible native used to fill gaps in gardens,



*Microlaena stipoidesis* another great lawn alternative, here it is with some *Dichelaena crinita* (in flower)



*Themeda australis* is a great filling grass that you can use to create a native meadow look

### Shrubs and trees

This group is the one most home gardeners know and love. There are so many different native shrubs and trees available to buy, it's



really up to individual choice in what you want to achieve. The only downside of some varieties is their relatively short life span (most shrubs will be lucky to get 20 years old), and this needs to be considered when you're planning your garden. Don't let this put you off at all, they're still great garden choices, but doing some specific research will pay off here.

Native shrubs like lilly pillies and westringia are great for fast growing hedges and screens. Grevillea, Callistemon, Mellaueca and Leptospermum all have amazing flowers. Larger trees such as Eucalypts, Angophora, and Corymbia are your traditional gum trees, and who can forget the amazing colour and smells of Acacias (wattles).

Trees and shrubs are also a really great source of bush tucker, like macadamia and Syzygium that can grow in your backyard. What separates these shrubs from traditional exotic options are the other benefits these shrubs will bring, by providing shelter and food for native birds and animals.

Using native shrubs can turn your backyard in a thriving community full of native colours and sounds!



A small grevillea that has a great little flower



Westringia fruticosa is a top plant choice for shaping or hedging



Bursaria spinosa has great white summer blossoms



Tips and tricks for growing natives.

There's not a lot of difficult tricks you need to know when you're growing Australian natives, but a few things are worth noting.

Climate is the most important consideration when using Australian native plants. Unfortunately our vast continent has extremely diverse conditions, from tropical in the north, arid and dry in the middle, cool in the south, and all the coastal zones within them.

This means that you really need to pick your plants to suit your conditions. Things to consider are humidity, wind exposure, heat, frosts, and rainfall. Thankfully though, this won't involve too much heavy research. Most nurseries will sell plants specific to the area they're in, and most plant tags have all the basic information you need to know.

I'm not saying you can't grow plants outside their normal climates, it just means you'll need to work harder to simulate them, whether this be extra watering or growing them in a greenhouse. All that extra work is too much hassle for some, but it can definitely be a rewarding endeavour.



Pruning should be kept to a minimum, with the exception of grasses and sedges. These you can cut back regularly into an architectural ball shape, or if you don't mind a bit of an eyesore, cut straight to the ground. For shrubs and small trees, you can prune them to shape (eg a lilly pilly hedge) as you need to, but try not to go too

hard. Whilst Australian natives are tough, they can't handle a pruning massacre.

Watering natives is also an important thing to consider. Even though many are drought tolerant, even the hardiest of plants will need some water, especially when you've just planted them. Australian natives are also often the victim of over loving with too much water. A good rule of thumb is if it's rained recently, don't water. If it's been dry and your plants look like they're wilting, give them some water. Common sense will prevail here

Fertilising is a no no on most natives. These plants are used to our nutrient poor soils, so adding artificial nutrients can have a negative affect. At a stretch, using some specific native fertiliser can help kick on some plants, as can some soft organic compost or mulch spread onto the soil.

Happy native gardening.