

Eucalyptus curtisii (Plunkett Mallee)

The first time I came across Plunkett or Brisbane Mallee was in the 1970s when working in landscaping at the newly opened Griffith University on Brisbane's south side. The campus was set in the beautiful, sandstone outcrop dotted bushland of Toohey Forest and *Eucalyptus curtisii* was one of the trees being used in plantings. It is not actually native to that particular site but in 1929 Denis Curtis collected the type specimen not far away in somewhat similar country – the sandstone hills of what is now Plunkett Conservation Park, about 50 km. south west of the CBD. That relatively late collection and identification suggests it wasn't a common plant and it was originally thought to be restricted to just that one locality. It was and remains listed as near threatened. However, as is often the case, the species was gradually found to occur at other sites although its distribution is disjunct (i.e., geographically isolated): Isla Gorge National Park and Expedition Range to the north, Barakula State Forest near Miles in the west and locally, on the slopes of Mt. Coochin and Rupari Hill near Beerwah. There is also a small stand to the east of Beerwah in national park and this occurrence is interesting if not unique as it is in sandy wallum country, becoming waterlogged in the wet season. Bushfire passed through the area a couple of years ago, the stand was burnt to the ground and new growth has sprouted from lignotubers to form a dense thicket.



In the background of the photo are paperbarks and other eucalypts. The *E. curtisii* are in the foreground, only about two metres tall and, when I visited recently, not flowering despite being the time of year for it (September – November).

Due partly to the tree's small size for a Eucalypt, 5 – 6 metres, it was a popular garden plant in the 1970s and 1980s. The Tewanin street tree pictured below was planted by the adjacent house owners and dates from that era. It seems to have had a heavy prune in its past which probably accounts for its growth habit.



It flowered particularly well this year (Sept '21). The large panicles are held prominently clear of the foliage and are very showy, another reason for its popularity as an ornamental tree. Terminal flowers are a feature of *Corymbias* but are unusual in the Eucalyptus genus. This and other unique characteristics have caused *Eucalyptus curtisii* to be classified as the solitary member of the subgenus *Acerosae* (Brooker 2000).



Other notable features are the bell-shaped fruit containing unusual, elongate, yellow-brown seed diagnostic for the species, and the smooth, shiny bark which comes in a range of fashionable colours.



The word mallee has its origins in the Australian Aboriginal Wemba Wemba language of southern NSW and Victoria and means water. Reportedly, ground water could be found by digging under certain Eucalypt species but “mallee” has come to mean a tree or shrub with several trunks growing from an underground lignotuber. Eucalyptus species that exhibit mallee growth are numerous in the southern states and Western Australia but in our region, there are only two mallee species I’m aware of: ***Eucalyptus curtisii*** and ***Eucalyptus kabiana*** (Mt. Beerwah Red Gum). Other local eucalypts such as Scribbly Gum (***E. racemosa***) may be multi-trunked but it’s not common. Another two mallee species occur in South East Queensland: ***Eucalyptus bakeri*** in the Gatton area and ***Eucalyptus codonocarpa*** from the Scenic Rim. The multi trunks tend to develop when there is significant damage to the tree (often fire, as seen with the stand in Beerwah National Park), hence planted specimens can remain single stemmed. This was the case with the only one I’ve ever planted in a garden, so the lesson is: if you want a Plunkett Mallee to be a mallee, treat it mean.

Robert M Price, November, 2021.