

Acacia

Leguminosae

[*Fabaceae/Mimosaceae*]

Acacia is derived for some authorities from Greek *akazo* (to sharpen) or possibly *akis* (sharp point). On the other hand there are those who believe it to be a Greek name for the species gum arabic (*Acacia senegal*) with reference to its thorns and yet others for whom it was a Greek name for babul (*Acacia nilotica*).

The common name Wattle by which these plants are known so often arose from the time of the English convict transportations to Australia that began at the end of the 18th Century. The convicts had to build their homes from local materials and used the only way they knew, the British method known as ‘wattle and daub’ (woven stems plastered with mud). Initially, anything but *Acacia* was used, particularly one plant in the Sydney area, *Callicoma serratifolia* which then came to be known commonly as Black wattle. (One of the key areas from which *Callicoma serratifolia* was obtained is known to this day as Black Wattle Bay.) In time however *Acacia* was also commandeered for the wattle and daub construction and in so doing took upon itself the overall term.

The Australian Aborigine tribes have existed on that Continent for at least 40,000 years and for most of that time it is likely that they have used the indigenous acacias. Unfortunately though much of their detailed knowledge about these plants (and other flora and fauna) is lost. This happened especially in the eastern part of the Continent when the various tribes were no longer able to maintain their traditional lifestyle as the land became overrun by the white man. Today that knowledge is beginning to be respected and those elders (especially in northern and western Australia) who maintain the remnants of the tribes’ collective experience are starting to be sought out – at the same time as modern research is pursued into the individual qualities of the innumerable *Acacia* species. This research has already indicated that, in addition to now familiar attributes, some acacia seeds are highly nutritious and these species are beginning to be grown in conducive arid areas of the world as a source of food.

According to authorities acacia gum has been used in the wider world for at least 4,000 years, especially that from gum arabic (*Acacia senegal*). Although gum arabic is probably the most familiar source of acacia gum it is not the only species in the genus which yields this. Of those gums available Kordofan Gum (also known as Sudan or Egyptian (*hashabi*) Gum) is said to be the best especially for medical use. This is usually whitish in colour (or tinged with yellow) and is the one most free of impurities. The many different types of gum (obtained from various species) are distinguishable to the expert by the size and shape of the fragments, their colour, transparency and stickiness etc. These include Kordofan (referred to above), Mogadore Gum (which has similar qualities to those of Kordofan but originates from the Isle of Bourbon), Indian Gum (which has a sweeter taste, contains a different type of gum and is usually considered inferior to Kordofan), Cape Gum (which is pale yellow in colour), Australian Gum (which comes from South Australia and has a violet tint), and Senegal Gum (from two different trees, one which yields a red and the other a white resin). Gum acacia is the original name for Kordofan Gum but the supplies of this dried up during the general unrest in Egypt and the Sudan region in the 1880s. Gum Senegal (a different species) was used as an alternative (and

was said to be the best of the substitutes). But, when things settled down and Kordofan was freely available, again the name 'Gum Senegal' became synonymous for both gums. A species from this genus was one of the at least 36 ingredients used by Mithridates (c.132-63 BC), the 1st Century BC King of Pontus (northern Turkey), in a poison antidote (known as Antidotum Mithridaticum or Theriac) which he took daily to acquire an overall immunity – an important consideration if it is remembered that he gained his position of power by poisoning his opposition.

In the language of flowers acacia is said to symbolize 'friendship', both rose acacia and white acacia are said to symbolize 'elegance', and yellow acacia is said to be symbolic of 'secret love'.

Members of this family (*Leguminosae*) absorb nitrogen from the air. Through the bacterial nodules on their deep growing roots they will introduce nitrogen to the soil (and aerate it) to the benefit of neighbouring plants and any following them in the same soil.