

Not just cases of extreme hunger. Surveys of edible native plants in Australian newspapers 1834 – 1934

In April 1834 the *Hobart Town Courier* published 'Some Remarks On the Roots and Other Indigenous Esculents of Van Diemen's Land'.¹ ²I think I can safely claim this as the first published comprehensive survey of edible native plants in the colonies (which would become Australia), albeit limited to Van Diemen's Land. It was one of 11 such articles published in the press between 1834 and 1934.³ The list of articles is Appendix 1. There were two articles surveying the full range of useful native plants and not only edible ones. They cover the same edible plants as the major surveys in less detail than those surveys and so are not discussed further here. They are included in Appendix 1.

This article does not deal with scholarly books published on the subject during 1834 - 1934 nor reviews of them.⁴ I also don't deal with recipes in cookery books. I am interested in the more publicly accessible sources of information.

Why were the surveys written? How did the authors get their knowledge of which plants were edible? What did the surveys say about how to cook with them? Answering these questions forms the first part of this article.

There are calls over these years for the cultivation of edible native plants but little progress till the 1980s championing of them by chefs and producers. The second part of this paper discusses this.

The third part of this article briefly looks at the position of edible native plants/bush tucker in 2024.

Part 1. Surveys of edible native plants 1834 – 1934

Precis of surveys

There is a persistent myth in Australia that early colonists shunned native food. 'In fact', writes colonial food historian Jacqui Newling, 'native produce played a vital part in the survival of early settlers ... Early settlers' journals show that there was a willingness to experiment with curious and exotic species of flora and fauna, some of which were highly prized'.⁵

It was a short step from this to applying scientific rigour to record findings of experiments and explorations. The 1834 article with its inclusion of the scientific names, sometimes Indigenous names, descriptions of the plant or its parts suitable for ingestion, records of their use by Indigenous Australians and suggested Anglo-Australian reads like a field guide for the enthusiast and experimenter.

The Van Diemen's Land plant is *Pteris esculenta*, it is known among the aborigines by the name of tara ... It varies in height from a few inches to several feet, according to the richness of the soil in

¹ 'Some Remarks On the Roots and other Indigenous Esculents of Van Diemen's Land', *Hobart Town Courier* 25 April 1834 p.4

² Van Diemen's Land is present day Tasmania

³ My source for all these articles is *Trove*, the digital repository of newspaper, journal and magazines managed by the National Library of Australia.

⁴ For example, J. H. Maiden's *Useful Native Plants of Australia* in which 200 of its 700 pages are given over to food plants which 'the author says should only be resorted to in the direst necessity.' *Useful Native Plants of Australia The Argus* 23 March 1889 p.13

⁵ 'Newling, Jacqui, *Eat Your History. Stories and recipes from Australian Kitchens*, Sydney Living Museums, The Mint and NewSouth, 2015 p.45

which it grows, and in some parts of the colony it is so tall as to conceal a man on horseback. The root is not bulbous but creeps horizontally at a few inches below the surface of the earth, and where it is luxuriant attains to the thickness of a man's thumb. Pig's feed upon this root, where it has been turned up by the plough, and in sandy soils they will themselves turn up the earth in search of it. The aborigines roast this root in the ashes, peel off its black skin with their teeth and eat it to their roasted kangaroo, &c, in the manner that Europeans eat bread.⁶

The 1841 article 'Australian Products' adds gravitas into the mix with the full botanic classification of each plant and a strict formal structure to each entry.⁷

Nat. Ord. Ficoinsx. Fig-marigold family.

Genus, Mesembryanthemum.

M. aquilatarais (pig faces), the canagong of the Aborigines. The pulp of the almost shapeless, but somewhat conical, fleshy seed-vessel of this plant is sweetish and saline; it is about an inch and a-half long, of a yellowish, reddish, or green colour. The celebrated Dr. Robert Brown observes, that this is the most widely-diffused plant in Australia, being found on all the coasts. It seldom extends many hundred yards inland, except along the margin of rivers like the Derwent and Tamar, which may indeed be called estuaries. The fruit is ripe about the end of January, February, and March.

The 1846 published lecture by the explorer/botanist Ludwig Leichhardt on edible native plants he encountered on his trek in 1844 from the Darling Downs, Queensland, to the Gulf of Carpentaria is the most casual and also the most energised.

The seeds of the Mackenzie bean, so called, from being found first and most abundantly in the sandy bed of that river, formed a good substitute for coffee; those of nelumbium were however much finer, and the remaining grounds were agreeable to eat, and wholesome. The seeds of the vine-bean of the Roper (a species of mucuna?) when pounded and boiled for a long time formed a very satisfying meal.⁸

These three offer no explanation of their purpose perhaps because they were clearly botanically intended. However, as early as the mid-nineteenth century surveys begin to present their finding as practical measures to address specific conditions in the colonies. In 1842 James Drummond wrote to the Editor of the *Inquirer* that while 'white men' might find native plants unpalatable they 'would at least support life in cases of emergency'.⁹ In 1863 *The Courier* linked the publishing of its article on 'Indigenous Food' to the recent (1861) deaths of explorers Bourke and Wills, suggesting that had the explorers had more knowledge of indigenous food sources they may have returned safe from their trek. 'But Fate otherwise willed it, and Providence appears now to have conferred upon us a means of averting the recurrence of similar disasters.'¹⁰

⁶ Some Remarks p.4

⁷ Australian Products, *Southern Australian* 17 December 1841 p.4

⁸ Dr Leichhardt's Lectures, Lecture II, Domestic Intelligence, *The Sydney Morning Herald* August 26 1846 p.2

⁹ Drummond, James, 'Botany of Western Australia', *Inquirer* 11 May 1842 p.4

¹⁰ 'Indigenous Food', *The Courier* 21 March 1863 p.1

Then in 1899 *Australian Town and Country Journal* in March 1899 commented:

It is certainly interesting to know what plants the first owners of the soil partially lived on. But (speaking from some experience of the blackfellow¹¹), we know there are many of these plants which are only resorted to in the most extreme cases of hunger.¹²

IN 1910 'Sigma' writing in *The Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser* was critical of this view. Writing about the burrawang palm they said:

The fact that it grows so freely all over Australia has caused its fruit to be despised except by those driven by hunger. Offer the average bushman a bowl of arrowroot made from a packet with a foreign label and one made from an Australian plant, and it will be found in nine cases out of ten that he will not touch the latter. It is so with a great number of Australian plants and trees whose virtues entitle them to be introduced into the dietary of the Australian people, and perhaps to a wider sphere.¹³

In 1904 the *Albury Banner and Wodonga Express* promoted native plants as substitutes when 'garden vegetables' were unattainable either sporadically or as a permanent part of a region's seasons, like the far north-west of New South Wales and Western Queensland.¹⁴ In 1933 *The Land* published an article describing native plants which could be used as vegetables and fruit 'when nothing better was available.'¹⁵ Also In 1933 'Murrungurry' writing in *The Land* discusses native plants that 'will refresh the thirsty traveller outback'.¹⁶ In 1934 *The Age* asked 'Lost in the Bush. — Would You Die of Starvation ?' and described native plants that would put off starvation at least for a few days.¹⁷ While the purpose differed, the descriptions of plants remained much the same with the exception of their botanical names.

Scrub yams are good substitutes for potatoes, and may be roasted or. boiled. The tubers are usually very deep in the ground, and it entails a good deal of hard labour to obtain them, especially as they grow in the deepest jungles where the interlacing roots of many trees are encountered.¹⁸

In 1939 Dr. E. Hirschfeld writing in the *Courier-Mail* advocated for the 'rich stores of highly nutritious native vegetables' :

. ... The poorer settlers of the Far West cannot afford to purchase vegetables such as we can produce on the coast. But their children must have vegetables. And Nature has provided them if we will accept them. As a medical man I feel confident there is more health and strength in Australian plants than is known even to Science. We should be up and learning.¹⁹

¹¹ I leave this and other derogatory terms unchanged for contextualising the remark.

¹² 'Useful Australian Plants', *Australian Town and Country Journal* March 1899 p.23

¹³ Sigma, Native Plant Foods, *The Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser* 29 June 1910 p.36

¹⁴ 'Edible Native Plants', *Albury Banner and Wodonga Express* 15 July 1904 p.12.

¹⁵ 'Favourite Fruits and Vegetables of Black Brother', *The Land* 17 November 1933 p.12

¹⁶ Murrungurry 'When the Water Bag is Dry' *The Land* 24 November 1933 p.12

¹⁷ 'Lost in the Bush. — Would You Die of Starvation?', *The Age* 5 October 1934 p.1

¹⁸ 'Edible Native Plants', *The Albury Banner and Wodonga Express* 15 July 1904 p.13

¹⁹ Hirschfeld, Dr. E. 'Native, Vegetables Exist to Give Health to the West', the *Courier-Mail* 18 January 1939 p.6

This resonates with Newling's comment about all native food sources: 'Their popularity declined in the early 20th century when they came to be seen as foods of necessity rather than desire, or 'poverty foods'.²⁰

Sadly, found no article written from the perspective of a food enthusiast/gastronomer proselytising, however minimally.

Knowledge and the getting of it

How did authors of these articles come to know which native plants were edible?

The great experts on this matter are undoubtedly the aborigines, who can yet teach the white man a lot concerning Australia. Necessity from time to time has driven them to investigate in this boundless field, till they have acquired a knowledge of every leaf, root, and berry that may be eaten, of every product unsavoury, and of every plant and fruit that is poisonous. This has been gleaned and transmitted through transmitted unknown ages.²¹

'...many hardy pioneers', wrote Barbara Santich in *Bold Palates*, 'were prepared to sample selected plant parts often following the example of the Aboriginal inhabitants'.²²

There are frequent references to Indigenous culinary practice, some gleaned through direct questioning, others through observation.

A species of tuber is often found in the colony, attaining to the size of a child's head: it is known by the name of native bread, its taste somewhat resembles boiled rice. ... I have often asked the Aborigines how they found the native bread, and have universally received the answer - a rotten tree.²³

The cunjevoi, which is plentiful on the eastern rivers, is a deadly poison in its raw state, but is nutritious when put through the same process as the arrowroot bulb. The blacks first roast it, and pound it afterwards, making it into, bread, which even then has pungent flavour.'²⁴

In my travels in Port Lincoln (the western part of South Australia) in the years 1851 and 1854 I was frequently obliged to travel with natives, and had opportunities of making the following observations concerning their food obtained from the vegetable kingdom'.²⁵

Occasionally the Indigenous name for the plant is given.

One of the most widely distributed fruit-bearing trees of inland New South Wales is the leafless currant bush, also called the warrior bush. The latter name is a corruption of the tree's aboriginal name of warriah.²⁶

²⁰ Newling, *Eat Your History* p.45

²¹ 'Edible Native Plants'

²² Santich, Barbara, *Bold Palates. Australia's Gastronomic Heritage* Wakefield Press, 2012, p.48

²³ Some Remarks ... p.4

²⁴ Edible Native Plant ... p.12.

²⁵ 'Australian Plants', *The Argus* 22 April 1857 p.6

²⁶ Favourite Fruits and Vegetables of Black Brother', *The Land* 17 November 1933 p.12

The other way of gaining knowledge was through personal contact with the plant. 'The colonists would have been grateful', Newling writes, 'to find vegetation they recognised and they compared native foods to foods known or understood from their own backgrounds.'²⁷

On a holding of 13,000 acres, he discovered many native plants capable of being used as vegetables, and resembling spinach, cabbage, carrots, cress, radishes, and salad leaves.²⁸

It is almost unnecessary to mention the common- mushroom, so abundant in many parts of the island, and of so agreeable a flavour. It seems to be precisely the same as the mushroom of England (*Agaricus esculentus*.)²⁹

One mourned what they saw loss of this knowledge between generations.

But what of the rich stores of highly nutritious native vegetables that Nature has provided in that country? The aborigines knew of them; so did the pioneers. We of this generation mostly dismiss them contemptuously as weeds.³⁰

What do the surveys say are the culinary uses of edible native plants?

Newling writes in *Eat Your History*: 'The colonists' existing culinary sensibilities also influenced the way native ingredients were used and cooked'.³¹ The culinary uses suggested for native plants in these surveys are well and truly in this mould. Below are some examples.

This is a 'recipe' for cooking pigweed at a bush camp:

I discovered a patch of the desired pig-weed where a wool scourers' camp had been I gathered a quantity of young, succulent plants, avoiding anything that had seeded These I boiled for about an hour in a kerosene tin, pressing afterwards between two tinned plates to free it of water. Then pepper, salt, vinegar, and a hard boiled emu egg were added, the whole being thoroughly mixed and chopped up fine. Prepared in this manner it is excellent eating; or it may be boiled with salt meat like cabbage.³²

'Fat-hen, wild spinach, stinging nettles, wild sorrel, water hyacinth, yam vines, boggabri, scurvy grass, etc. may all be used (to make a savoury soup), or in seasoning, or chopped up with meat; or any of them may be used like cabbage.'³³

Saltbush could be prepared different ways:

Between bread and butter (saltbush) leaves are a welcome and tasty addition to corn-beef sandwiches. When boiled, including even the tender young stems, they make eatable spinach; and raw they can be made into a salad.³⁴

²⁷ 'Newling ... *Eat Your History* p.45

²⁸ Hirschfeld, Dr. E. 'Native, Vegetables Exist to Give Health to the West', the *Courier-Mail* 18 January 1939 p.6

²⁹ 'Some Remarks' ... p.4

³⁰ 'Native Vegetables Exist to Give Health to the West', *The Courier Mail* 18 January 1939 p.6

³¹ 'Newling ... *Eat Your History* p.46

³² *Edible Native Plants* ... p.12

³³ *Edible Native Plants* ... p.12

³⁴ 'Native Vegetables Exist to Give Health to the West', *The Courier Mail* 18 January 1839 p.6

A savoury soup can be made ... with the addition of the usual condiments and a little rice. Some add flour to thicken it.³⁵

Warrigal greens 'is a native of Australia as well as of New Zealand, and is an excellent substitute for English spinach'.³⁶

Making jams and jellies from fruit was common.

THE red and pink quandongs have a slight tartness, not relished by all white people, though many, including the writer, rather like the flavour. Even those who do not like the raw fruit, however, usually like quandong pies and jam. The white quandong is superior in flavor, and has little or no tartness.³⁷

Various sorts of native grape have been used to make jam or jelly, but they are not to be eaten raw.³⁸

I found an early reference for the culinary use of the wattle-seed:

Of the genus *Acacia*, the Aborigines were in the habit of collecting the pods of the species *Sophora* or *Boobialla* (which is a common shrub growing from six to fifteen feet high, on the sand-hills of the coast), when the seeds were ripening, and after roasting them in the ashes, they picked out the seeds and ate them. The seeds of *A. Verticillata* (prickly *Acacia*), and some other common species, might doubtless be eaten in the same way.³⁹

A number of leaves were used to make tea: *Correa Alba*⁴⁰; *Leptospermum* and *Melaleuca*⁴¹; *Acana Sanguisopa* - The Burr-of the colonists⁴²; *Atherosperma moschata* - Sassafras.⁴³

There was a recipe for the bottle tree:

No one need starve or go thirsty where bottle trees are growing. A Queensland woman gives this recipe for bottle-tree jelly : — Cut some healthy bottle-tree root into small pieces. Soak in hot water, boil for a few hours, strain, add equal weight of sugar, boil again, adding colouring and essence of fruit to taste. Pour into glass jars and let cool.⁴⁴

Also mentioned were: *Oxalis microphylla*, -yellow flowered sorrel (made into tarts, it is almost equal to the barberry)⁴⁵; Native currant (made into puddings)⁴⁶; *Solanum laciniatum*. Kangaroo apple (may

³⁵ Edible Native Plants ... p.12.

³⁶ 'Native Vegetables... p.6

³⁷ 'Favourite Fruits and Vegetables of Black Brother', *The Land* 17 November 1933 p.12;

³⁸ 'Some Edible Wild Fruit', *The Telegraph* 21 September 1935 p.12

³⁹ 'Australian Products', *Southern Australian* 17 December 1841 p.4

⁴⁰ 'Australian Products', *Southern Australian* 17 December 1841 p.4

⁴¹ 'Australian Products', *Southern Australian* 17 December 1841 p.4

⁴² 'Australian Products', *Southern Australian* 17 December 1841 p.4

⁴³ 'Australian Products', *Southern Australian* 17 December 1841 p.4

⁴⁴ 'Edible Native Plants', *Albury Banner and Wodonga Express* 15 July 1904 p.12.

⁴⁵ 'Some Remarks' ... p.4

⁴⁶ 'Australian Products', *Southern Australian* 17 December 1841 p.4

be eaten in its natural state, or boiled or baked)⁴⁷; Goosefoot family⁴⁸; Scrub yams (good substitutes for potatoes, and may be roasted or boiled⁴⁹; Cress family (eaten like the common cress)⁵⁰; *Gastrodia sesamoides* (roots are roasted in taste they resemble beet-root, and are sometimes called in the colony, native potatoes)⁵¹; *G. hispida*, or wax cluster (in tarts, the taste is something like that of young gooseberries, with a slight degree of bitterness)⁵²; the native cranberry (*S. luimifusa*) (produces sweet, succulent glutinous berries)⁵³.

Indigenous culinary practices were noted also.

Nardoo seed, zamia fruit, cunjevoi, water lilies, bunya bunya fruit, wild pineapple, cobblers' pegs, &c ... are ground or pounded into pulp or powder, washed, dried, and made into a cake, or into a kind of porridge.⁵⁴

Gastrodia sesamoides roots are roasted and eaten by the aborigines: in taste they resemble beetroot, and are sometimes called in the colony, native potatoes.⁵⁵ [This suggests to me that it was eaten by colonists.]

All of this notwithstanding when the Victorian Acclimatization Society held its Second Experimental Dinner in 1864 the only edible native plant on the menu was Queensland yams.⁵⁶

Part 2. The cultivation of edible native plants

Running parallel with these articles on the nature, uses and benefits of native plants was discussion about cultivation of them. The quotation above is from a letter written by 'Oedipus' to *The Age* in 1871.

Tetragonia tetragonioides, Botany Bay greens or native spinach (wild sorrel to some), writes Newling, 'was probably the predominant native green vegetable in the early colony ... Thriving in Sydney's climate and sandy soils, and so similar to the taste of English spinach, it was one of the few native plants cultivated for the table in colonial gardens.'⁵⁷

It was the only native plant Charles Fraser, first Colonial Botanist and Superintendent of the new South Wales Botanic Gardens listed in the *Memoranda of Australian Fruit and Vegetables* to the 'Australian almanack (sic) for the year of our lord 1831'.⁵⁸

Thomas Shepherd, proprietor of the Darling Nursery, horticulturist and landscape gardener delivered four public lectures in 1834 on the horticulture of New South Wales. Shepherd discussed the cultivation of New Zealand spinach and added to the candidates for cultivation the Native Currant.

⁴⁷ Australian Products', *Southern Australian* 17 December 1841 p.4

⁴⁸ Australian Products', *Southern Australian* 17 December 1841 p.4

⁴⁹ Edible Native Plants ... p.12.

⁵⁰ Australian Products', *Southern Australian* 17 December 1841 p.4

⁵¹ Some Remarks' ... p.4

⁵² Australian Products', *Southern Australian* 17 December 1841 p.4

⁵³ 'Lost on the Bush - Would you die of starvation?', *The Age* 5 October 1934 p.1

⁵⁴ Edible Native Plants ... p.12

⁵⁵ 'Some Remarks' ... p.4

⁵⁶ 'Acclimatisation Dinner', *The Argus* 7 July 1864 p.4,

⁵⁷ Newling, *Eat Your History* p.46

⁵⁸ Fraser, Charles Esq, Colonial Botanist, 'Memoranda of Australian Fruit and Vegetables', *Australian Almanack for the year of our lord 1831* pp. 153 - 155

The Native Currant [*Acrotriche depressa*]- This has been too much neglected as regards cultivation for general use. Although plenty of fruit may be found in the neighbourhood of Sydney, yet many persons in the Colony may not be able to obtain any, and in consideration of its usefulness I would recommend its cultivation. The fruit of the native currant having a sharp acid flavour, answers very well by mixing with other fruits which are of themselves too flat, and consequently the native currant is a valuable fruit for preserving, to mix occasionally with other fruits, and at the same time may be used by itself for tarts, and its much liked by many persons.⁵⁹

Shepherd died in 1835. He was succeeded as nurseryman at the Darling nursery by his son, also Thomas Shepherd. In 1851 Thomas Shepherd (jnr) published his *Catalogue of plants cultivated at the Darling Nursery, Sydney, New South Wales ... to which is added a few practical remarks on the cultivation of the orange and the olive in Australia*. Of the catalogue he wrote:

In preparing the following Catalogue of Plants for the Press, it occurred to me that by a small additional outlay, it might be rendered useful as a book of reference to those of my fellow-colonists who take an interest in the study of plants and horticulture. ... It must be observed, in the first place, that the Catalogue is nothing more than a nurseryman's list, made subservient to the particular end in view, and that its highest aim is the conveying of information that has never hitherto been published in so condensed a form; it, however contains nearly all the cultivated, ornamental, and fruit-bearing plants at present in the colony.⁶⁰

The list included the following edible plants⁶¹.

Panicum (Native Millet) p.9
Pandanus p.10
Yams p.4
Zamia (Cycads) p.14
Hibiscus (Rosella) p.14
Dianella (Flax Lily) p.14
Solanum (Bush Tomato) p.28
Acmena (Common Lillypilly) p.34
Calandria (Parakeelya) p.42
Exocarpus (Native cherry) 23
Acacia p.25
Carissa (Currant Bush) p.27
Portulaca (Purslane, Pig Weed) p.22
Rubus (Native Raspberry) p.26
Quandong p.36
Physalis (Native Gooseberry) p.28
Convolvulus p.28
Ipomaea (Bush Potato) p.28
Capparis (Wild Orange) p.17

⁵⁹ Shepherd [Horticulture](#) pp.73 – 74

⁶⁰ Shepherd, Thomas, *Catalogue of plants cultivated at the Darling Nursery, Sydney, New South Wales ... to which is added a few practical remarks on the cultivation of the orange and the olive in Australia*. 1851 Preface pp. v - iv

⁶¹ This list has been checked against 'Edible Native Plants' *The Albury Banner and the Wodonga Express* 15 July 1904 p.12 cross-referenced with Low, Tim, *Wild Food Plants of Australia*, Angus and Robertson, Second Edition 1991, First edition 1988.

These may have been bought for the kitchen garden or home orchard or collectors wanting unusual specimens for scientific knowledge/reference/intellectual kudos. There are advertisements from nurserymen for native plants seeds as early as 1832 but the context suggests that these were for native flowering plants.⁶²

In August 1855 Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Thomas L. Mitchell delivered an address to the New South Wales Horticultural Improvement Society on 'The Cultivation of Native Plants' In it he said inter alia:

The association I have now the honour to address encourages the hope, that Anglo-Australians may yet in time bring into cultivation, and render it for man's use, the indigenous plant which, at first, are of course wild plants, or flowers of the field or forest, until they undergo that process which alone can fit them for the use of man. ... The large and juicy Aldingham carrot is only the woody spinal root of the wild carrot (*Daucus carota*) luxuriously fed. Our cabbages, cauliflowers, kohlrabis, and turnips, in all their varieties, spring from one or more species of *Brassica* ... The productions of this land, "in wilderness even benign," may furnish materials to a world becoming more and more pregnant with the expansive powers of science and may also afford additions to the luxuries of the table and to our comforts and medicinal remedies that shall diminish our pains mid diseases, and shall lengthen life.⁶³

Acclimatisation Societies did at times receive seeds or saplings of edible native plants for cultivation and distribution. For example, Bunya Bunya, rose apple, Queensland nut and Burdekin plum listed in the published report of the Queensland Acclimatisation Society.⁶⁴ In 1892 the Society noted it had received native raspberry plants.⁶⁵ But I have yet to find evidence that as a result cultivation took place on a commercial scale. Oedipus writing in *The Age* was critical of the work of Acclimatisation Societies:

If attention had been directed to the improvement of our native fruits and seeds, instead of to the acclimatisation of the improved plants of other countries, great progress might have been already made in proving that our Australian flora is as rich in food-producing plants as in any other good quality.⁶⁶

In 1928 the *Daily Mercury* published an article by James Daveny again calling for the cultivation of native plants which echoed Mitchell's comments:

As regards native fruits, this country lags behind many others, but with such a climate as we enjoy it would be well worthwhile to cultivate some of our better wild fruits. Even the best orchard fruits we have were in the far past small and inferior wild berries, etc.⁶⁷

Despite all of this, I found no evidence in *Trove* to indicate cultivation of edible native plants in Australia until the 1980s when a groundswell of chefs and producers started to more fully

⁶² 'Botanical Seeds and Dried Specimens of Plants', *The Hobart Town Courier* 28 January 2832 p.2

⁶³ 'The Cultivation of Native Plants', *Empire* 9 August 1855 p.3

⁶⁴ 'Acclimatisation Society', *Brisbane Courier* 16 March 1883 p.5

⁶⁵ 'Acclimatisation Society', *Brisbane Courier* 21 October 1898 p.3

⁶⁶ 'Darwinism and Our Native Fruits' *The Age* 26 June 1871 p.

⁶⁷ 'Useful Native Plants' Nature Notes *Daily Mercury* 21 July 1928 p.3

embrace/explore opportunities to develop a market. The exception that proves the rule is cultivation of the macadamia nut in Hawaii and not Australia.⁶⁸

Why might this have been? One factor I suggest was the change already cited above by Newling of the status of native plants 'when they came to be seen as foods of necessity rather than desire, or 'poverty foods' and so not worthy of cultivation.⁶⁹

Another factor is what Santich called 'just plain xenophobia'⁷⁰ and what native food restaurateur Jean-Paul Bruneteau called food racism.⁷¹ This was identified in 1895 by Mr. F.M. BAILEY in the course of delivering a paper to the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science in which he said:

We are fully aware that to a large number of Queensland residents these native fruits are unknown, while to others they are known, used, and appreciated, and we may fairly hope, as time rolls on and vulgar prejudice dies out, that our fruits will be allotted a place in the fruit garden and the produce known in commerce.⁷²

Yet another factor was emphasised by Mitchell's talk and that is that cultivation takes time. There is also the money that would need to be invested. Both of these were being put into the cultivation of familiar fruits and vegetables and were also being put into cultivating native flowering plants. In 1871 'Oedipus' wrote in *The Age*;

... if attention had been directed to the improvement of our native fruits and seeds, instead of to the acclimatisation of the improved plants of other countries, great progress might have been already made in proving that our Australian flora is as rich in food-producing plants as in any other good quality.⁷³

The last factor I think was the lack of champions until Jean-Paul Bruneteau, researcher Vic Cherikoff, high end restaurateurs Raymond and Jennice Kersh, and growers Dennis and Marilyn Ryan began their businesses in the 1980's.

Part 3. Edible native plants in 2024

Edible native plants were sporadically discussed after 1934. In 1942 W. P. I. wrote to the *Sydney Morning Herald* assuring readers that 'Should a vegetable "crisis" be added to our other troubles, country dwellers, at least, should have nothing much to worry about. If they look around they will soon find reasonably good substitutes, all nearly as good as the "real thing." They meant common stinging nettles, saltbush, the warrigal cabbage, cock weed, fat-hen and young roots of kurrajong.⁷⁴ The recipe field was dominated by the rosella⁷⁵ as jam, chutney, pickle, and syrup. Quandongs were the next most used native plant also as jam and chutney.⁷⁶ Saltbush had returned to being cattle

⁶⁸ Newton, John, *The Oldest Foods On Earth. A history of Australian Native Foods*, NewSouth 2016 p.181

⁶⁹ Newling ... *Eat Your History* p.45

⁷⁰ Santich ... *Bold Palates* p.64

⁷¹ Newton ... *Oldest Foods On Earth* p.91

⁷² 'Indigenous fruits for cultivation', *Biology, The Queenslander* 2 February 1895 p.231

⁷³ 'Darwinism and Our Native Wild Fruits', *The Age* 26 June 1871 p.3

⁷⁴ 'Nearly As Good. Bush Vegetables, *Sydney Morning Herald* 4 April 1942 p.7

⁷⁵ Hibiscus sabdariffa

⁷⁶ Santalum acuminatum

fodder. The last dish of warrigal greens I found was in 1946.⁷⁷ In 1954 the Beefsteak Club⁷⁸ in New South Wales held an all native produce dinner but just three native plants made it to the menu - edible seaweed, lily roots, and yams.⁷⁹

With the resurgence of interest in the 1980s came experimentation and cultivation with a wider range of native plants. My larder today holds several native plant seasonings: Mountain Pepperberries; Davidson Plum Freeze Dried Powder; Ground and Roasted Wattle Seed; Pepper Leaf Flakes; Saltbush Flakes; Lemon Myrtle Flakes; Ground Bush Tomatoes; Powdered Kakadu Plum; Sandalwood Nuts; and Quandong Peach Powder. Warrigal grows wild in my front yard. Pigweed makes a seasonal visit to my backyard and footpath. I have a finger lime tree in my backyard also which every year produces enough fruit for me to make jam and pickle.

In my home library I have a dozen books on native plants and their uses, the more recent half a dozen authored by Indigenous knowledge holders. Indigenous knowledge holders run field trips to acquaint people with the native plants in the bush and the Indigenous stories for each.

There is a native food/bush tucker industry to research into and cultivate edible native plants. Wild harvesting on traditional lands by the traditional owners continues. Indigenous chefs have established their own restaurants championing native plants and Indigenous ways of preparing them. Non-Indigenous chefs have embraced them too and are partnering with Indigenous knowledge holders in a turnaround of the situation that saw their knowledge stolen or disregarded. Interestingly, one of the native plants in Thomas Shepherd's 1851 catalogue – panicum, native millet – is now getting a lot of attention as an alternative grain crop.

There has been a complete reversal of the position of edible native plants at the Australian table: from vilified to valorised.

I am grateful to Jacqui Newling and Dianne Nixon for their assistance with this article.

⁷⁷ 'Spinach Is Easily Grown Crop' In the Garden *The Sun News-Pictorial* 27 September 1946 p.26

⁷⁸ 'The Beefsteak Club is a group of Sydney business and professional men who get together once a month at the Toby Tavern, in King Street, for a five-hour gustatory session.' Boys, Larry, 'Plenty Good Tucker – An All Australian Gourmets' Feast, *Daily Telegraph* 21 February 1954 p.18

⁷⁹ Boys ... *Plenty Good Tucker*

Appendix 1. Articles on edible native plants reviewed.

Main surveys

Australian Products, *Southern Australian* 17 December 1841 p.4

Drummond, James, Botany of Western Australia, *Inquirer* 11 May 1842 p.4

Edible Native Plants, *Albury Banner and Wodonga Express* 15 July 1904 p.12.

Favourite Fruits and Vegetables of Black Brother, *The Land* 17 November 1933 p.12

Hirschfeld, Dr. E. Native, Vegetables Exist to Give Health to the West, the *Courier-Mail* 18 January 1939 p.6

Indigenous Food, *The Courier* 21 March 1863 p.1

Dr Leichhardt's Lectures, Lecture II, Domestic Intelligence, *The Sydney Morning Herald* August 26 1846 p.2

Lost in the Bush. — Would You Die of Starvation?, *The Age* 5 October 1934 p.1

Sigma, Native Plant Foods, *The Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser* 29 June 1910 p.36

Some Remarks On the Roots and other Indigenous Esculents of Van Diemen's Land, *Hobart Town Courier* 25 April 1834 p.4

Useful Australian Plants, *Australian Town and Country Journal* March 1899 p.23

Other surveys

Daveny, James, Useful Native Plants Nature Notes, *Daily Mercury* 21 July 1928 p.2

'Fabian', Useful Native Plants, Ways of the Wild, *The Queenslander* 30 May 1924 p.44