

FAIR GO



Busy Crowds enjoying the Collector's Plant Fair at Bilpin (top)

Unusual *Aloe plicatilis* was a popular purchase at the Plant Collectors' Fair (middle)

Native plant lovers found plenty of good quality stock to choose from at the Native Plant Sale at Oakdale (above)

STORY AND PHOTOS CATHERINE STEWART FAILDM, MHMA

With two enticing plant fairs on outside Sydney last weekend and only one weekend day available, it was a very tough call to choose which one to see. So what to do but go to both? It was an exhausting day but well-worth the trouble and the travel.

What makes a good plant fair? First for me is obviously the range of goods on sale but the plant knowledge of the vendors comes a close second and it must all be tied up with good organisation or the day is spoilt.

Collectors' Plant Fair, Bilpin NSW

Arriving just after the 9am opening time with a pre-booked ticket, the slickness of **Peta** and **Peter Trahar's** organisation is on show right away. No endless queuing here as about half a dozen cars at a time are processed and the parking is quick and close by. The Trahar's lovely perennial gardens and spreading trees make it a great place for a picnic and there's a decent espresso quickly available for the caffeine-deprived traveller.

Three long lines of plant-sellers' tents are set up beneath a shady avenue. Plenty of space between vendors means there is room to have good browse without feeling like you're in someone's way. Checking out the non-plant stalls first I find the omnipresent **Gil Teague** of **Florilegium** books with his usual extensive range.

The Old Mole Garden Tools has some interesting old, traditional tools on show which I love the look of but can't afford. The AILDLM stand looks good with a range of garden plans on show.

I fancy myself as having a pretty extensive plant knowledge but at every step here I am challenged by plants I haven't seen before, unknown species of familiar genera and even plant names that are completely new to me. Orchids, succulents, cool climate and warm temperate perennials, gingers, bulbs and deciduous trees are everywhere. Some of the real specialist nurseries are here showing their *Salvia*, *Helleborus*, *Pelargonium*, *Vireya*, *Rhododendron* and *Viola* collections. Interstate nursery stalls such as Mistydowns and Yamina Rare Plants show that the fair is really getting some 'street cred'.

I come away with an *Osmanthus fragrans var aurantiacus*, *Justicia nodosa*, *Pachystachys lutea*, *Clerodendron bungei* and a long-spurred lemon yellow *Aquilegia x chrysantha*. I run into Elwyn Swane who has spent a packet on the extremely rare *Worsleya procera* and another friend Alida who has the unique and striking *Aloe plicatilis*. Definitely not your average nursery stock!

Native Plant Fair, Oakdale NSW

A long but easy 2 hour drive later, I arrive at Oakdale, southwest of Sydney. Again the organisation is excellent with clear signage



Peter Olde's garden at Oakdale made a stunning backdrop for the Native Plant Sale

and good parking. First on show for me is host **Peter Olde's** magnificent new garden 'Silky Oaks' of both native and exotic plants, displaying many of the rare *Grevillea* species he has collected over the years. (Peter is co-author with **Neil Marriott** of the authoritative *The Grevillea Book*). Long sinuous garden beds are cut into the rich soil and planted out with a huge variety of native plants from all over Australia. Towering *Syncarpia* provide pools of shade and deciduous autumn foliaged trees pick up the vibrant russets of flowers, seed pods and new leaf growth among the native plants. Delicate flower heads of a rare white form of the grafted *Grevillea petrophiloides* wave in the breeze. Separate beds feature collections of *Telopea* and rainforest native species. Peter's garden will be open in spring as part of the Australian Open Garden Scheme. Don't miss it.

Guest speakers **Don Burke, Angus Stewart, Cas Liber** and **Merv Hodge** entertain and inform the crowds about new plant releases and propagation secrets.

A roped-off area contains tables laden with plants for sale from a variety of growers, each colour spot coded for a particular price which is paid in one transaction on exit. **Australian Plant Society** (APS) members such as **Brian Roach** and **Ray Brown** wander the sale area helping buyers with their expert knowledge. Available plants cover a wide range of native flora although there are fewer rainforest species than I hoped. Still, I am tempted

by at least 20 plants and have to whittle down my purchases to a grafted *Grevillea* 'Ivory Whip', *Pelargonium rodneyanum*, *Grevillea* 'Molly' which I fell in love with after seeing it in Peter's garden and *Ricinocarpos pinifolius*.

Plant labelling

You will often hear me banging on about the poor state of many of our plant labels, especially those that lack even a basic botanical name. Plant fairs like these are plant label heaven with all stock properly labelled right down 'subspecies' this or 'var' that. Feeling confident that the label does describe what is actually in the pot is the other big bonus as plant fair sellers are about as pedantic and accurate as it's possible to be.

Fun

Maybe even better about my day than the plant scalps I got to bring home was enjoying the atmosphere of both places which were filled with bustle and laughter. The excitement of all being kids together in the plant candy store meant complete strangers readily struck up conversations, sharing their knowledge and good humour. If you've lost your joy in horticulture and need a pick-me-up, these plant fairs are your medicine. If only we could persuade them not to be on the same weekend for those of us who swing both ways!