

# A timber adored around the world, jarrah is quintessentially Australian

FROM the Nyangar language quintessentially Australian jarrah (*Eucalyptus marginate*) trees are native to Western Australia and well adapted to the harsh and dry conditions in that state.

Jarrah is a long-lived majestic tree at least 500 years and up to a 1000 years or more and easily 40 m tall with a trunk 2 m across and rough, very dark brown bark.

In pre-colonial times, there were millions of hectares of jarrah forest on the leached soils of what is now called the Darling Plateau in Western Australia's southwest. Fragment miniature flowers cover the tree in clusters of 10 or so, attracting bees, which make a distinctively malty, caramel-flavoured honey from its nectar.

Jarrah is the linchpin of an important and complex forest ecosystem, home to distinctive Australian marsupials – the numbat, potoroos, quolls and the quenda.

Colonists quickly saw the value in the rich red jarrah wood, which is immensely

**“LINCHPIN OF AN IMPORTANT AND COMPLEX ECOSYSTEM**



strong and resistant to rot, insects, wind and water. It was eagerly taken up for shipbuilding and harbour pilings. When convicts arrived en masse in Western Australia from 1850, the flood of cheap labour meant that jarrah could be exported across the British Empire to feed an expanding appetite for railway sleepers and other durable infrastructure, such as telegraph poles, wharves, and industrial construction. A

1/ Jarrah trees... the linchpin of an important and complex Western Australia forest ecosystem.

2/ Upmarket... rich, red jarrah stairs.

1897, despite the shipping costs and distance, some 30 km of London's busiest and swankiest streets had been clad in millions and millions of blocks of jarrah timber imported from Western Australia.

In 1900, Australia jarrah was being sold in England for less than vastly inferior timber brought from nearby Sweden. It was a lucrative, but unsustainable business.

Despite the rapid forest loss it wasn't until the end of World War I that laws were introduced to more sensibly manage the remaining jarrah forest. Even when asphalt replaced wooden paving blocks soon afterwards, the demand for jarrah timber for construction work continued to be strong.

Today, jarrah timber maintains its reputation as one of the world's most recognised and renowned hardwoods. While construction applications remain, it is now more commonly used in decorative applications such as flooring and furniture making.

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network of steam-powered sawmills and railways sprang up to extract and process jarrah timber.

Unsurprisingly, when jarrah wood was exhibited in 1886 at the Indian and Colonial Exhibition in London and advertised as a durable paving material there was huge interest. Lasting decades and non-porous, jarrah was immediately very popular. By



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