

‘Symbols of national identity – Golden Wattle and National Wattle Day’

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Volunteers with STEP, Friends of the National Arboretum and the Wattle Day Association have been celebrating National Wattle Day (1 September) at the National Arboretum Canberra (NAC) since 2015. On this day, wattle blossoms colour and scent the arboretum at locations such as STEP (Forest 20), the Golden Wattle Grove (next to Cork Oak Road carpark) and the Pod Playground and there are wattle walks and talks for the general public. But why do we celebrate and what do we celebrate?

The early history of National Wattle Day (NWD) and *Acacia pycnantha* (Golden Wattle) reveals a rich symbolism focused on national identity and unity. More than a century later the words of early wattle advocates still resonate.

The following highlights some of their reasoning.

The wattle day movement began in Adelaide, South Australia when Will J Sowden, a member of the Australian Natives’ Association (ANA) - a friendly Society for ‘Australian-born white men’*- proposed the Wattle Blossom League – a ladies’ society in conjunction with the ANA. Formed on 12 May 1890, this independent league aimed to: promote a national patriotic sentiment among the women of Australia; interest women in the work of the Australian Natives’ Association and encourage in the household among the rising generation, a spirit of Australian patriotism. It only lasted a year.

In 1891 in Melbourne the ANA was considering adopting some sort of an Australian motto and emblem. David Scott of Mount Lonarch Victoria, suggested that all the colonies would be united in an emblem of wattle, in all its variety. He suggested a motto: ‘Unity, Peace and Prosperity’. Nothing was decided however.

Later that decade, Melbourne naturalist Archibald Campbell founded the Wattle Club in 1899 and ‘encouraged the recognition of the golden bloom as a symbol of patriotism, among other virtues’. However, when the Federation of the Australian colonies was celebrated on 1 January 1901, there was no flower for Federation.** In 1908 (9 September) Campbell delivered an address where he advocated specifically for the honouring of a Wattle Day throughout Australia. He wrote, ‘Approximately, there are about 500 species of *Acacia* flora in the world, of which perhaps over 400 are Australian; therefore by numbers, the Wattle is almost exclusively Australian, and should undoubtedly be our National Flower’***

In Sydney a year later (1909) three people convened a preliminary meeting of sympathisers with the ‘Wattle Day Movement’. JH Maiden, Government Botanist of the Sydney Botanical Gardens, Mrs Agnes Kettiwell (a poet from South Australia who wrote under the pseudonym of Agnes I. Storrie) and Mrs Hannah E. Clunies-Ross, wanted to

organize a 'Wattle Day' throughout the Commonwealth, to stimulate 'Australian national sentiment', and connect it with the love of our beautiful flora. On this day they suggested that the Australian national flower – the Wattle Blossom – might be worn, and its display [everywhere] encouraged. Wattles might also be sown and planted on this day. They suggested that a date in September would be universally suitable, but did not propose that it be a holiday.

Two days before the first Wattle Day in 1910, Ellenor Symon and Muriel E. Farr of the newly-formed South Australian Wattle Day League promoted the wattle as Australia's national flower in Adelaide in the newspaper *The Advertiser*. They encouraged the wearing of the blossom on 1 September to foster national pride and identity in a celebration of patriotism, unity, and love for their homeland. It was no coincidence that two years later stylised wattle was added as a decorative embellishment to the new Commonwealth Coat of Arms by Prime Minister Andrew Fisher who was a supporter of the aims of the Wattle Day League. And perhaps it is not surprising that as a result, many Australians thought that wattle was their floral emblem.

However, it wasn't made official until 1988 in Australia's bicentennial year. Thanks to a campaign led by Maria Hitchcock ('The Wattle Lady'), radio host Ian McNamara, and members of the Australian Native Plants Society, a particular species of wattle, *Acacia pycnantha* (Golden Wattle) became Australia's national floral emblem. Four years later, the Governor-General of Australia officially declared 1 September as National Wattle Day across the country.

National Wattle Day gained little awareness or popularity after its initial announcement, leading Jack Fahy to establish the Wattle Day Association in Canberra in 1998 to promote it. The association is still going strong and promotes National Wattle Day as 'A celebration of Australia and Australians'; an inclusive day for all Australians when we celebrate all that we have the privilege of sharing across this great land of the wattle. It has a popular website and if you wanted ideas about how to celebrate National Wattle Day (1 September), check out our 100 ways to celebrate National Wattle Day (<https://wattleday.asn.au/top-100-ways-to-celebrate-national-wattle-day/>)

Happy Wattle Day!

Notes:

*This Australian Natives' Association advocated for the federation of Australian colonies and promoted a distinct

Australian identity, separate from Britain, while still remaining loyal to the British Empire.

** In fact, state floral emblems were not officially established until the late 1950s and 1960s. It wasn't until decades

later, in 1988—the bicentennial year of the First Fleet’s arrival in Sydney—that *Acacia pycnantha* was declared

Australia’s national floral emblem.

***In 2025 we have 1,076 described Acacia species and plants called *Acacia*. As a result of a decision by the Nomenclature Section of the XVII International Botanical Congress, plants in other countries that were once classified as *Acacia* but have different characteristics, no longer belong to the Acacia genus.

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