

Austral Grass-tree, *Xanthorrhoea australis*.... Margaret MacDonald

'Grass trees epitomize the Australian bush: they're beautiful, ancient, hardy, thrive in nutrient-poor soils and respond to wildfire by flowering profusely'. (Bush Heritage Australia).



Grass-trees are endemic to Australia and certainly capture the attention of overseas botanists if they manage to visit Australia when the species are flowering.

The Austral Grass-tree is widely distributed in the Anglesea district. It is a slow-growing, fire-resistant perennial often with a rough trunk-like stem that has been formed from old leaf bases stacked on top of each other and stuck together by a naturally occurring resin. They are very

long-lived with some plants being estimated to be 350-400 years old. The long, rigid, linear leaves are clustered in a terminal crown.



Xanthorrhoea australis responds well to fire with bushfires encouraging flower development. Flowers form on a spear-like spike which can be about 250cm long. Most plants will produce a flowering spike, and

present a spectacular display in the heathland and woodland.



The flowers that are arranged in a spiral up the spike produce a great amount of nectar with the fragrant flowers attracting a wide variety of insects, birds and mammals.

Unfortunately, many of our beautiful grass-trees have been devastated by *Phytophthora cinnamomi* or Phytophthora Dieback. This soil-borne water mould infects and rots the roots of the grass-trees where microbes called mycorrhiza surround the roots in a symbiotic relationship to help the plant take up nutrients. The

water mould enters this system and causes the plant to die.



Australian Admiral butterflies feeding on nectar



We can help minimise the spread of Dieback by keeping our footwear clean – spraying with a solution of 70% methylated spirits diluted with water, and not walking in areas where plants are obviously affected by the pathogen.

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