

fresh focus

By Bill McKinley AIFD and Bruce Wright

Bright and fuzzy, banksias call out to be noticed—and touched.



IN GREEK MYTHOLOGY, Proteus was a sea-god capable of assuming many different forms. He has given his name to a family of woody-stemmed plants bearing flowers of many different and unusual shapes: the Proteaceae. Members of this family are distributed throughout the Southern hemisphere. The best-known genus, *Protea*, hails from southern Africa, as do its relatives in the genera *Leucospermum* (pincushion proteas) and *Leucodendron*.

But there's an Australian branch of the family as well. It's named after the botanist Joseph Banks, who took part in the legendary first voyage of the explorer James Cook (1768-71) to the eastern coast of Australia. Banks collected specimens of plants with large, spiky, bottlebrush-type flowers that

today are known as banksia proteas, or simply banksias.

Like other proteas, flowers in the genus *Banksia* offer not only striking form and texture but long vase life—typically from seven to 14 days and ranging up to 21 days with proper care. Each tightly packed inflorescence is actually made up of hundreds or even thousands of small individual flowers attached to a central axis. (Most banksias are cylindrical; bird's-nest banksias have a rounder shape.) The tiny tubular flowers typically open over a period of days—a process that can result in a dramatic change sweeping up or down the flower head. Acorn banksia, for example (*Banksia prionotes*), is usually fluffy orange at the bottom of the inflorescence, white at the top. The white flowers are closed pollen sacs;

as they open, they reflex to reveal the colorful orange style within.

In nature, some banksias spread along the ground, while others grow tall like trees, according to Diana Roy at Resendiz Brothers (www.resendizbrothers.com), a southern California grower. Banksia flowers range in size from four to as long as twelve inches.

Clockwise from above far left: *Banksia ashbyi*, *B. coccinea*, *B. integrifolia*, *B. prionotes*, *B. speciosa*, and *B. dryandra*. The photos at far left and top right are courtesy of Neotropica, a guide to tropical flowers and plants from Hawaii. To learn more, visit www.design358.com. Remaining photos are courtesy of Resendiz Brothers, www.resendizbrothers.com.

Common name	Botanical name	Comments
Acorn banksia 'Orange Frost'	<i>Banksia prionotes</i>	6-to-8-inch spikes have bright orange open flowers at the base contrasting with white unopened flowers at the top. 4-to-6-inch leaves have a saw-blade-shaped edge.
Ashby banksia	<i>Banksia ashbyi</i>	8-to-10-inch heads are typically bright yellow or yellow-orange in color. 3-to-5-inch leaves have a saw-blade edge.
Banksia pods	<i>Banksia integrifolia</i>	Cone-like seed pods range in size from 3 to 5 inches in length.
Bird's nest banksia	<i>Banksia baxteri</i>	3-to-4-inch heads are varying shades of green to yellowish green. 3-to-4-inch leaves have a saw-blade edge.
Scarlet banksia	<i>Banksia coccinea</i>	2.5-to-3.5-inch heads are orange or red-orange in color. 1-to-3-inch leaves are short and have large sharp lobes.
Showy banksia	<i>Banksia speciosa</i>	3-to-5-inch heads are yellow or creamy yellow in color. 4-to-7-inch leaves have a saw-blade edge.

"Colors range from silvery green through brilliant gold, yellows and orange to violet and deep red shades," says Diana—and Resendiz Brothers also offers tinted banksias in brilliant, solid red, orange and purple.

One of the fascinating features of banksias is the foliage, which varies from small leaves like pine needles or heather to large, leathery blades with deeply serrated teeth. Sometimes the foliage may be purchased separately from the flowers.

Banksias are still harvested from the Australian bush as they have been for many years. Some species are also farm-grown in Australia, California, Israel, and Hawaii. The Hawaiian climate might seem very different from Australia, but it does include cool, dry microclimates well suited to growing banksias.

One type of banksia or another will be available at any time of year. Still, banksias—unlike other wildflowers from southern Australia—are most abundant in summer, autumn and winter.

All in the family

We would probably see an even greater variety of banksias on the market were it not that banksias are difficult to propagate from cuttings. Most species must be grown from seed, posing a challenge to breeders and also to adventurous growers, since it takes a long time to find out whether any new seeds you've planted will thrive and produce a marketable flower.

Still, producers have managed to introduce some novelties over the years. Pam Shingaki, a technician at the University of Hawaii College of Tropical, Agriculture and Human Resources in Kula, cites *B. menziesii* 'Raspberry Frost', a striking bicolor in pink and orange, noted also for its long stems. "The color varies a lot," she notes; "sometimes it's more raspberry, other times more pastel pink and yellowish," depending in part on the season and the flower's stage of development. Banksia "candles" are another innovation, with long, red-gold flowers in

shrubby clusters.

Among the most popular species is *B. ashbyi*, says Pam, a soft apricot-orange cylinder with a fragrance that has been compared to buttered popcorn. Another is *B. integrifolia*, a.k.a. "white honeysuckle" banksia, according to Diana at Resendiz Brothers. (Like other Proteaceae, banksias are rich in nectar, attracting a range of pollinators from birds and bats to "honey opossums"). *Integrifolia* sports silvery-green blooms that later develop into beautiful brown seedpods, available as a dried material. For lime-green spikes on extra-long stems, ask for *B. speciosa* (the name means "showy banksia"), sometimes called 'Mint Julep'.

If you're looking for something different, don't neglect the varied genus *Banksia*. With so many choices, there is bound to be a banksia that's a perfect match for you—and for your discriminating clientele. 🌿

care tips banksia

- Remove 1-2 inches of the stem end and place in a tepid floral food solution. Condition in a well-lighted area at room temperature for 1-2 hours.
- Banksias are not tropical flowers. Therefore, they do benefit from storage in a floral refrigerator—ideally at 40 degrees F and 85% humidity.
- To prevent black leaf spots and blackened leaf tips, keep banksia in a well-lighted area in the cooler, always use floral food, and keep away from high temperatures. Decaying leaves in the buckets may also lead to black leaf spots.
- Banksia are easily dried by hanging them upside-down in a low-humidity and low-light area. The large flowers may take 3-4 weeks to completely dry.