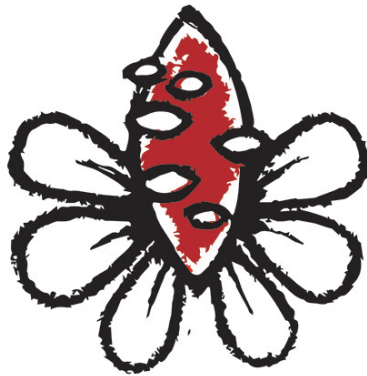


# Foraging Guide



**Red Banksia**

Art from Nature

[www.redbanksia.com](http://www.redbanksia.com)

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## What to look for:

Foraging for Australian native flora can be fun and rewarding. Almost all of the native species in Australia can be used to create highly decorative and striking works of art. These spent seed pods are the mainstay of my work. The Epoxy resin is only used a method of preserving and binding these elements together. It is easy to just label this art form as “epoxy art” but I think it is so much more.

All Australian states and territories have native species that can be used in your work. Please note that it is illegal to collect any plant matter in National parks and that there are state restrictions in what flora can be collected. WA has the most stringent laws which essentially forbid collection of any flora without a license, even in your own backyard! I believe that such rules are too far reaching and heavy handed. It is doubtful if the authorities would fine you for picking Banksia flowers in your backyard! These regulations are put in place to stop people clear felling land to harvest either the timber or the fruit. Having said that, laws are laws and I need to make sure you are aware of them.

This is not meant to be a comprehensive guide to collecting seed pods and branches. There are literally thousands of species in Australia and even after 3 years of full-time foraging, I have just begun to scratch the surface. What I intend to do in this guide is to show you which common species you can collect and how to treat and preserve them in your work.

In my work, I mainly use 3 main species with small amounts of wild flowers and leaves:

1. Banksia
2. Eucalyptus (gum trees)
3. Allocasuarina (She-oaks)

## Banksia

The majority of these plants are from the South West of WA. However, almost all coastal areas of Australia have a usable endemic species of Banksia. Many inland locations also have species of Banksia growing in nature strips and backyards.

You can use the flowering stage of all Banksias. Colours are generally yellow but can be red, orange and purple. Banksia flowers are seasonal. You need to pick them fresh and preserve them for later use. The cut flower industry is a good source of finding the more exotic Banksia flowers on the east coast. I generally cut Banksia flowers cross-sectionally.

The pod stage of the Banksia flower can also be used. The seed pods are often very woody and the sizes can range from 30mm to 300mm. The majority of the bigger banksias can not be used in the DIY kit since they are too large for the river. Banksia pods are extremely hard and I generally cut them longitudinally with a band saw. Please do not try to split banksia pods (or any other pods) with a circular saw. You will lose fingers. Either sand them down to size which is very time consuming or find someone with a band saw and a steady hand. A cut Banksia pod has been included in the DIY kit. Banksia branches can also be used but I rarely use them as the timber is often pulpy and very porous.



**Figure 1. Flowering & pod stages of *B.Menzeisii* & *B.Grandis***

## Eucalyptus

These are the most used native flora in my work. You can use gum flowers as accent pieces and bursts of colour. The pods (gum nuts) are extremely bold and very beautiful. The sizes of these pods vary from 1mm to 150mm. Some of the bigger species from WA are not suitable for the small river sizes in the DIY kit. I only use gum nuts cross-sectionally. One reason is that cutting round gum nuts even with a band saw is extremely dangerous. If a gum nut does not fit in to the river, I sand it down. I never cut them.

You can also use Eucalyptus branches although they are usually very bland.

## Allocasuarina

She-oaks are an extremely widespread shrub in Australia. Sizes vary from small shrubs to medium size trees of 10m. The she-oak flowers are too small to be used but the nuts are great either cut cross-sectionally or longitudinally. The nuts' sizes vary from 20mm to 100mm. Even the largest she-oak nut can fit inside the river of the DIY kit.



**Figure 2. Various native branches cut on a band saw and drying**

She-oak branches are the only ones I use in my work. Once cut cross-sectionally, they reveal an amazing array of bandings and patterns. She-oak is a very hard wood and although you can cut green branches up to 10mm thick with garden shears, you will need a saw to cut thicker branches.

## Flowers

All species of ever-lasting and paper daisies can be used. Some of these flowers can be very large and so will not fit in the river. The smaller varieties are best but can be over 12mm tall which means that they will stick out of the river. Choose the smaller ones and you may want to flatten them by pressing them in a large, heavy book. Native flowers are also seasonal but can be preserved for later use. The cut flower industry is a great source for obtaining these. Note that flowers have a 2-3 month shelf life and will lose their vibrancy if stored for long periods.

## Other natives

You can use various Hakea species both for branches and pods. Most Hakea nuts are too big so although I do use them with my larger rivers, most are not suitable for the DIY river. The flowers are very beautiful but extremely fragile and change colour in the presence of epoxy. Grevillea are very similar to Hakea. The flowers are very fragile and also susceptible to epoxy.

I would not bother foraging much of these two species for the DIY kit.

## How to forage

Here are some basic tools if you are going hunting for natives.

This is my tool kit:

1. Garden shears
2. Pair of trimming scissors
3. Plastic bags
4. Hand-saw

You need a basic plan of what kind of species you are likely to find in your neighbourhood. I use many properties all around Australia and know exactly what is available and when. Simply driving around towns will give you a good idea of what kind of species are available. For example, there is no point looking for WA banksias in North Queensland — you simply will not find any. Stay indigenous and local to start with. You can get some amazing results even if you live in the inland areas of Australia.

Unless you are blessed with an amazing native garden you will be picking and foraging in other people's property. Make sure that you seek their permission before trimming their trees. In my experience, once people find out what you plan to do with pods and other natives, they will be happy to help you out.

Don't go foraging in National parks folks. It is illegal! Be careful if foraging in WA; although there are many fantastic natives there, the new forestry regulations make it very difficult to collect anything — even in your own garden — without a permit! These laws are in place not to stop artisans collecting small amounts of pods but are there to stop crooks who strip the land to sell the timber.

I live in an area where there is great diversity of Banksia, Eucalyptus and she-oaks. If I lived in an arid area of Australia, I would concentrate on she-oaks and small Eucalyptus. You are not likely to find many Banksias in central Australia. Limit your palette and you can still achieve amazing results.

## What to forage?

The biggest tip I can give you is that if the pods are on the ground, do not pick them. These are often 2 or 3 seasons old and have been exposed to the elements and that is why they have fallen from the tree. The ground collected pods usually turn black when the epoxy hits them. Only pick from the tree. Use garden shears to cut the pods or branches. Do not break the pods or branches off. This will needlessly damage the tree and the property owner will not be happy with you either.

The DIY kit offers a river that is roughly 230mm x 65mm, so if you are foraging for natives that you can use in the river, concentrate on smaller species. There is no point collecting a 300mm Banksia Grandis pod. It simply will not fit in the river. Figure 3 shows the size variation in Eucalyptus nuts. The pod on the left (Eucalyptus Macrocarpa, WA) can be up to 100mm in diameter and is too large to be used in the DIY river.



**Figure 3. Variation in size of gum nuts.**

If you wish to collect branches more than 10mm thick, use a hand saw. Try and collect fresh branches (green) from the tree. Branches on the ground are often a few seasons old and can go black with epoxy. Avoid them.

The best time to pick gum nuts and banksia pods is when they are ready to or have just shed their seeds. Some of the larger Banksia species will only shed their seeds after they are burnt. Banksia Serrata (East coast) is an example of such a pod. Avoid them for the DIY kit. Gum nuts will mostly open naturally to shed their seeds. As a rule of thumb, if the pod is not open, you should not use it in the DIY river.



I do use some leaves in my work but generally the majority of green foliage will discolour in the presence of epoxy. I would avoid leaves to start with. You can start experimenting after you have done a few pieces.

## When to Forage

Foraging is a seasonal activity. This is especially true if you are looking for the flowering stage of the pods. To make matters more complicated most flowers have a limited shelf life and once dried and preserved, they should be used within a few months. The pods, gum nuts and branches are also seasonal and need to be picked at the right time. They have a very long shelf life and can be stored in a dry place with almost no degradation. For example, *Banksia Integrifolia* flowers from autumn to winter in the southern climates so you will need to look for the fresh flowers in this time window. The pods form by mid spring and you can collect the woody pods between spring and early summer. It is a waste of time to forage for *Integrifolia* flowers in mid-summer, they will not be there. *Eucalyptus Ficifolia* (Red Flowering gum) has excellent flowers in many colours that can only be collected in a very short season around mid-summer in the southern climates. All branches (she-oaks, gums etc.) can be collected at any time of the year.

The golden rule here is that if you are after flowers you need to know your seasons and your species. The pods and gum nuts are less seasonal but still need to be collected within a couple of months of budding and dropping their seeds.

**Know your species and know your seasons.**

## How to preserve natives

Your biggest enemy when it comes to preserving natives in epoxy is moisture. Anything that you collect from trees or bushes needs to be thoroughly dried before use. The extent of drying will depend on how large the species are. Small flowers will dry in a few days while large banksia pods will take a few months. If you are collecting small Banksia pods for the DIY river, I recommend that you split the pod on a band saw (or find some one who will do it for you) and this will greatly speed up the drying process. A 100mm Banksia pod which has shed its seeds naturally will be ready for use in 2 weeks. Likewise, branches will dry very quickly if cut into small slices rather than left as a stick.



**Figure 4. Drying various Banksia flowers**

Small gum nuts that have shed their seeds only require 2 weeks before use. If you are picking gum flowers, cut the bottom third of the pod with scissors and leave them on a flat surface for 2 weeks.

Banksia flowers should also be cut cross-sectionally and dried on a flat surface for 1-2 weeks.

I realise that the temptation is to use freshly picked flora so you can get going quicker, however, this will result in major problems with the epoxy curing and can cause the epoxy to delaminate (come away from the wood). Only use natives that have been dried thoroughly.

The pods that I have included in the pack have been thoroughly dried and you can use them immediately. If you wish to pick your own flora, always make sure that they are fully dried

before you use them. I do not recommend using dehydrators or microwave oven to quickly dry flora.



**Figure 5. Drying *Eucalyptus Ficifolia* flowers**

She-oaks are very easy to preserve. The nuts are a breeze to collect and only need 1-2 to weeks to dry. Limit yourself to branches smaller than 30mm in diameter and cut them into thin slices to speed up the drying.

## The species to forage for

I will try to outline the species you can easily pick and use in the DIY river.

### **Banksia**

These are mainly coastal species and there are only a small number of species that are endemic to the arid interior of Australia.

If you live on or near the east coast the most common Banksia species suitable for use in the DIY kit are the coastal Banksia (*Banksia Integrifolia*) or Silver Banksia (*Banksia Marginata*). You can find these two from Adelaide to north QLD. If you live in or near the tropical north from Broome to Cairns then Banksia Dentata is a great substitute. For those of you in WA, you are spoilt for choice but most of the great western banksias are too large to use in this kit. Your best choices are Banksia Littoralis or Banksia Attenuata. Some of these pods can get very large so select the smaller ones. Even in inland parts of Australia you can run into Banksias in domestic cultivation. Your options are very limited compared to those living on the coast.

### **Eucalyptus**

Gum trees can be found every where in Australia. The golden rule here is making sure that the pods fit into the river. Larger gum nuts generally come from the smaller Mallee trees — conversely massive trees like the river redgum and mountain ash have very small pods. There are also lots of gum trees used as ornamental trees on nature strips and front yards. Have look around and just see what is available.

These are hundreds of small gum nuts you can use for the DIY kit so I will only list a few of them here:

1. Eucalyptus Camaldulensis (river red gum)
2. Eucalyptus Ficifolia (red flowering gum)
3. Eucalyptus Caesia (silver princess)
4. Eucalyptus Erythrocorys (red cap gum)
5. Eucalyptus Preissiana (Bell fruited mallee)
6. Eucalyptus Forrestiana (Fuschia gum)
7. Eucalyptus Sideroxylon (Red iron bark)
8. Eucalyptus Polyanthemus (red box)
9. Eucalyptus Melliodora (Yellow box)
10. Eucalyptus Lehmannii (Bushy Yale)
11. Eucalyptus Marginate (Jarrah)
12. Eucalyptus Tetragona

You may not be able to find all of these species in your area but you will be able to substitute other indigenous seed pods.

Limit yourselves to gum nuts that are less than 30mm in diameter. Remember that you need to sand these into an 11mm thick slice. Sanding down a large pod will take a long time. Try and use the smaller pods — they also look better in a small river like the one in the DIY kit.

### **Allocasuarina**

She-oaks are extremely common in all parts of Australia. I live in southern Australia and I generally limit myself to two species, coastal She-oak (*Casuarina equisetifolia*) and forest She-oak (*Allocasuarina torulosa*). These are the species that are endemic to my area, but you can use any She-oak that grows near you. I have never come across a She-oak that could not be used in my work.

## Summary

Foraging for natives is a lot of fun and as long a few basic rules are followed, very easy and productive too. The following list is a quick cheat sheet for you to follow on your foraging expedition:

1. Never pick in national parks
2. Make sure that you know the state rules regarding the harvesting of flora
3. Seek landowner permission before collecting in private properties
4. Always pick from the canopy, NEVER from the floor
5. Make sure you know your indigenous species
6. Know your flowering seasons
7. Pick live flora and then thoroughly dry yourself
8. NEVER use green (wet) flora in your work.

These cover the basics and I am sure you will add more to this list as you become experienced in foraging. I hope you have fun in the bush and come back with some great species that will live for a long time in your own native kit.

Yours truly,

K.D. ELASSO  
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