

“CELEBRATE OUR WATTLE” EXHIBITION

TUESDAY, 1 SEPTEMBER 2009

THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL BOTANIC GARDENS

At the outset, I acknowledge the traditional Custodians upon whose ancestral land we are privileged to be. I also pay tribute to Robert Boden, his life, his work, his memory and his association with these Gardens.

Mr Taylor, Minister (Peter Garrett), Mrs Marlena Jeffery (the Patron), Mr Munns (the President) and all of the Friends of the Australian National Botanic Gardens, and friends of our nation’s floral emblem, the Golden Wattle. I am confident that that covers everyone here.

There is a variety of reasons why we should celebrate the Golden Wattle here at these Gardens today. Most obviously, today, the first of September, is our National Wattle Day and where better to celebrate both the day and our Nation’s floral emblem than here at our National Botanic Gardens which are so important and which contribute so much to our National environment and its heritage.

The other reasons are perhaps more special. There are at least three of them.

First, as Peter Garrett has mentioned, today is the 21st anniversary or birthday of the publication in this place by the

then Minister for Home Affairs, Senator Robert Ray, of the proclamation of the Golden Wattle as our nation's official floral emblem. It had, of course, sometimes in competition with the more locally confined Waratah, been generally recognised as the primary floral symbol of our Continent for many years before that. Indeed, it is true to say that its ultimate recognition as the official national floral emblem was inevitable and long overdue.

The second more special reason is that we are unveiling Lynne Stone's embroidered sculpture of Golden Wattle which was commissioned by the Friends of the Gardens to celebrate this birthday. I warmly congratulate Ms Stone and all involved in the commissioning of the sculpture. It will flower throughout the whole year here in the Visitor's Information Centre to remind all who visit these national gardens of the significance and the beauty of our nation's floral emblem. I add a sincere and more general tribute to Lynne. Not only, among her varied talents and abilities, is she a brilliant artist who has exhibited widely in this country, including her remarkable "Blooming Threads Exhibition" here at the Gardens in 2007. She is personally an inspiration as she overcomes the loss of her artistic equipment, and of course as part of the Marysville community her loss of so much more, in February's tragic Victorian bushfires. She, her beautiful sculpture and the Golden Wattle which it portrays are all, in their own way, symbols of courage and recovery.

The third more special reason for celebrating the Golden Wattle here today is that we are gathered to open the “Celebrate Our Wattle: Australia’s golden emblem comes of age” Exhibition which is being staged by the Friends of the Australian National Botanic Gardens to display the beauty, the resilience, and the manifold utility of the wattle and, even more important, its symbolic and unifying importance to our nation and its people. The Friends of the Gardens have contributed mightily to the Gardens over the past 20 years and this new Exhibition is an important new achievement. I sincerely congratulate Pat and Warwick Wright and all associated with them in all the work involved in its assembly, preparation and staging.

Let me add just a few personal words about the Golden Wattle itself.

We should always be conscious of the importance of the spiritual in the life, indeed in the very existence, of our nation, including the significance and importance of our national symbols. Probably the most obvious of these symbols are our national flag, our national anthem and our national floral emblem. Two of the three, the flag and the anthem, are sometimes seen by some as open to challenge or suggested improvement. The same could never be said of our national floral symbol which unequivocally represents and stands for our nation, its beauty and its spirit. The Golden Wattle has become our cherished symbol of celebration, of joy, of sadness and of remembrance. And of home wherever we may

be. And of our national unity. Rightly, quite apart from its own intrinsic significance as our national floral symbol, it inspires our national colours, decorates our national Honours and is incorporated in our national Coat of Arms.

Twenty-one years ago, here at the National Botanic Gardens at the announcement of the official proclamation, both Mrs Hazel Hawke and Senator Ray referred to a variety of poetic references to the wattle in our national literature. All of them are evocative of the Golden Wattle's beauty and national importance. I have always regarded one of them with particular affection since I first learned its words at primary school here in Canberra almost seventy years ago. It is Henry Lawson's "Waratah and Wattle", written in 1905. Senator Ray quoted from the first verse of the poem. Now, as we celebrate the 21st birthday, let me remind you of part of the second verse:

Australia! Australia! So fair to behold
While the blue sky is arching above;
The stranger should never have need to be told,
That the Wattle-bloom means that her heart is of gold ...

And now it is my great privilege to declare the Friends of the Australian National Botanic Gardens' "*Celebrate Our Wattle: Australia's golden emblem comes of age*" Exhibition officially open.