

The Eucalyptus of California

The Early Years

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Eucalyptus is a large family having over 600 species growing in its native habitat of Australia. It is like the pouched mammals found there having a species for every climatic variable. There are small ones, large ones, bushy ones, and erect ones. One for every possibility. Species of eucalyptus live in a vast array of local natural environments. Some are found in arid climates. Others prefer swampy conditions with its abundance of moisture. Some can exist in low temperatures while others will be burned by the frost.

The eucalyptus is a world traveler. It has been successfully grown on almost every continent. Its fast growth, size, and beauty are attractive features persuading the interested to plant seed. It grows best in environmental conditions similar to those in its native habitat which is generally semi-tropical to semiarid. The eucalyptus has served humankind in many ways. It has been used as fuel and as windbreaks to protect crops, farm animals, and buildings. Its oils have been extracted and used in medicine and in scented products. At one point in recent history, it was thought to alter the local atmosphere making life healthier for the residents.

Baron Ferdinand Von Mueller sometimes referred to as "the Prophet of the Eucalyptus" because of such exuberant predictions. Being a pragmatic scientist as well, he spoke on the eucalyptus' ability to stop soil erosion and soil shift. He described the method by which the roots decomposed rock creating better soil for crops. He also discussed the use of eucalyptus to halt malaria by disinfecting the air, and in the broader sense, to clean the air at large for healthier living.

Australians were among those seeking wealth in the gold fields and they brought with them a mental picture of their homeland's landscape. In California they saw barren hills and valleys. They could visualize how their lofty and majestic eucalyptus could change such a bleak picture.

California vegetation was indeed bleak with the exceptions being the pine forests which grew at the higher elevations and the redwoods of the northern counties. There were oaks, willows, sycamores, and scrub brush growing on the hills and in the valleys at the lower elevations, but the desirable land was virtually treeless.

In 1870, in its biennial report, the State Board of Agriculture spoke of the need of "artificial forests" in California to cover the barren terrain. The influx of gold seekers, among others, had stripped the forests to the degree that within a few decades there would no longer be usable forests in California. It was the duty of the board to stop any further destruction of the state's forests and to encourage the planting of new vegetation. To quote, "It is a matter of importance to encourage and foster the growth and cultivation of forests." In 1862, a state law was passed to protect timber. It disallowed the cutting of trees on private land or public streets which seems extreme, but it was needed to stress the importance of trees to the state. The federal government too promoted programs to encourage tree planting. In 1873 a federal law was enacted which gave 160 acres to anyone who planted 40 acres in trees and maintained them for a period of eight years.

Origins

There is some speculation as to who was the first person to plant eucalyptus in California. Most accounts seem to point to W.C. Walker who was the owner of the Golden Gate Nursery in San Francisco. It is believed that he planted the first seeds in 1853 from 14 different species. Maybe it Captain Robert H. Waterman planted the first eucalyptus seeds in California. In a biography of this clipper ship captain, entitled [That Fabulous Captain](#), one finds that Waterman bought land in Suisun Valley for his retirement and planted eucalyptus in 1853.

Whoever was first, by the end of the nineteenth century, California had been fully populated by the eucalyptus. It was being used for fuel, windbreaks, medicines, shade, and beautification. Writing in 1904, Alfred McClatchie observes, "Without the Eucalyptus, California would be a very different state. What she owes to them it is impossible to fully estimate. Without them, landscapes now varied and softened by their presence would be comparatively monotonous and unattractive. Winds would sweep unchecked over barren regions where their progress is now moderated by groves of Eucalypts. Orchards and crops that grow in the shelter of Eucalypts would be unproductive and had not these trees been introduced the fuel problem would be dire. "

The whole eucalyptus tree could be used from its roots to its crown, from its bark to its foliage. It not only provided fuel, windbreaks, medicine, shade and beauty, it also was lumber for implements, nectar for bees, pulp for paper, and chemical for boiler cleaning. When cut down, the eucalyptus would resprout providing yet another crop of products within a few years. It appeared to be a miracle tree only

limited by one's imagination. It created an excitement leading to a surge of interest that would become the boom of 1905 to 1912.

Eucalyptus or Bust

The eucalyptus boom got immediate support from the 1907 U.S. Forest Service circular with the title "The Waning Hardwood Supply and the Appalachian Forests,". It was a frank discussion of the shrinking supply of hardwood. It was a scary report that received wide publicity. In it the facts concerning the remaining hardwood supply in each Appalachian state were defined. It was bleak. Harvested amounts were falling off. Something had to be done to fill the gap. "The inevitable conclusion is that there are lean years close ahead in the use of hardwood timber. There is sure to be gap between the supply which exists and the supply which will have to be provided. How large that gap will be depends upon how soon and how effectively we begin to make provision for the future supply."

Knowledge of the eucalyptus had already spread across the United States. Those in forestry circles knew it was a fast-growing tree that could provide strong and durable wood if given the proper treatment. In California some had grown eucalyptus on prime agriculture land with excellent results. The government had done tests on certain species to determine its strength and durability. Those results were admirable. Eucalyptus simply showed great promise.

In 1907, the first nursery that was exclusively eucalyptus, produced 600,000 seedlings. By 1911, all eucalyptus nurseries together in California would have a total production of 7 1/2 million seedlings. Eucalyptus companies advertised for investors to be partners in the enterprise. An investor could buy land fully planted and make monthly payments. The company did all of the work, and shared what profits there were with their business partners. It normally took ten years before a profit could be realized. An acre planted in eucalyptus cost \$250 with the promise of making \$2,500 an acre at harvest time ten years later.

From Fall 1909 to Spring 1910, 23,000 acres in California were planted in eucalyptus, mostly red and blue gums. These investments were obviously at an infancy stage as it would take years before harvesting could take place. Eucalyptus still at this point was being used primarily for firewood.

The boom fizzled. It was found that eucalyptus wood could not be seasoned properly for lumber and furniture. However, the eucalyptus remained well and flourishing. Beautiful forests dotted the coastal hillsides and crevices. They supplied firewood and blocked harsh Pacific gales that damaged crops and orchards. They had become a permanent fixture so that most residents of the state believed them to be native. Left untouched, their size even awed visiting Australians.

Renewed Interest

Then there was a renewal of interest in the 1950's. The Masonite Corporation tested various eucalyptus species in regard to fibreboard. In the 1960's, the University of California Cooperative Extension launched a program to identify eucalyptus species determining which ones grew the fastest.

The energy crisis of the 1970's and a renewed interest in small-acreage farming brought more attention to the miracle eucalyptus. Alternative sources of energy was high on the agenda. Instead of turning generators with petroleum fuel, biomass fuel such as wood and other similar substances, was being considered. This form of energy was examined by the University of California and the State Forestry Department, and in the 1980's, nine biomass study sites were created. Much of the information we have today is the result of the data provided from these sites.

Today environmental tolerances of the various eucalyptus species are now being further tested provoked by recent warnings of global warming due to the use of fossil fuels. Eucalyptus is found worldwide with major industrial production occurring in India and China. There are environmental and cultural concerns to address. But it is for certain, like it or not, that Eucalyptus will always be a tree for the future because it has so much to offer humanity.