

The Ashes

Fraxinus species

There are three Ashes common in South Australia - English Ash, Desert Ash and Claret Ash. English Ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) is the only commercial timber of the three but the other two are common street and garden trees, regularly cut down and therefore available for us to use for craftwork.

Although it is usually said that Botanical names are the most accurate way of describing plants, in this case there are several variants of Desert ash. It was formerly widely known as *F. oxycarpa*, and is now commonly known as *F. rotundifolia* or *F. angustifolia*.

The name *F. rotundifolia* is considered by many authors to be of questionable botanical standing and that *F. angustifolia* is more appropriate. Claret Ash is a variety of Desert Ash and is often named as any of the three with variety *raywoodii* added. This is significant to us as South Australians as this variety was raised in 1928 at "Raywood" the former home of the Downer family. Claret Ash is now cultivated and grown over most of the world for its beautiful claret or plum purple foliage during autumn.

Desert Ash (and Claret Ash) will be described in greater detail in this article.

Derivation of names

Fraxinus - classical Latin name for the Ash tree.

exce/sior - taller, lofty - Ashes are amongst the tallest of the European trees

angustifolia - narrow leaves

rotundifolia - round leaves

Related species

There are about 35 species of the Genus *Fraxinus* found in the temperate regions of the northern hemisphere, primarily in Great Britain, Europe, Scandinavia, North Africa, Asia and North America.

Probably the most commercially valuable Ash is American White Ash (*F. americana*)

The Tree

Desert Ash has long been a popular parks and garden tree in South Australia. It is a tall graceful tree to 25 metres with ascending branches with a dense crown. They are deciduous trees with compound leaves up to 300mm long with pinnate (paired) leaflets, sharply toothed and bright green in colour.

The leaves of Claret Ash turn to their brilliant claret colour in autumn, although like most autumn colours a cold frosty snap is required to gain the brilliant colour. The bark is pale greyish brown, rather smooth and slightly furrowed on young trees but becoming darker and more deeply furrowed as they mature. The flowers are small and insignificant but produce flattened winged seeds before the new foliage develops. These winged seeds hang like bunches of keys and persist for some time on the tree (they are called keys).



leaves & fruit (keys) of the Desert Ash

Desert Ash is a hardy quick growing tree and was once highly favoured as a garden tree. However it is now often considered to be a weed and in many riverside habitats has become feral. Some years ago, local councils bordering the Torrens Linear Park spent much time in removing Ashes. Because they tend to drop all of their leaves into the water courses over a short time, they deplete the oxygen content of the water to the detriment of the natural wildlife. It is amazing to see how quickly they have regenerated and the River Torrens in the north eastern areas now show hundreds of young trees along the watercourse.

Timber

The colour of Ashes is generally white to pale straw although older trees can show light brown heartwood. The timber often varies in weight but is generally about 500Kg per cubic meter. It is usually straight grained but can show figurative grain and often has fiddle back grain. The texture is quite coarse and it is said to be ring porous.

The pores immediately adjacent to the growth rings are large and are prominent. This aspect lends the timber to colouring and liming. If a coloured water dye is applied to the finished article and then a layer of liming wax is wiped on and then removed, an interesting effect is achieved, as the white wax fills up the pores and highlights the growth ring pattern. The timber is hard but also elastic and is useful for steam bending and laminating.

Main Uses

It is not a commercial timber, but is excellent for wood turning. It would be suitable for furniture, as well as many of the traditional uses of English Ash e.g. ladders, tennis racquets, sporting equipment, tool handles etc, but we all know that these days synthetic materials have taken over many of these traditional uses.

Ron Allen