

Fleurieu Peninsula Swamps Aboriginal Values Food plants



Wattle seed, reeds and shoots were important food plants around Fleurieu Swamps. © Nicole Motteux & Paul Stokes, 2021

The main food plants used by Aborigines and being found in and around Fleurieu Swamps are wattle trees, reeds and sedges and native orchids. Wattle trees, particularly Swamp Wattle (*Wirilda*, *Acacia retinodes*) and Golden Wattle were used as a source of gum and edible seeds. **Edible wattle gum** is recorded as one of the principal foods in the Adelaide region, with Golden Wattle (*Acacia pycnantha*) considered to be a key source because it exudes gum from the lower trunk during the warmer months, often caused by insect borer attack. Early records describe Aboriginal people roasting wattle gum in the fire before eating it, often with meat as Europeans might use bread. Examples are described of fish being cooked on a fire and accompanied by larger lumps of wattle gum roasted on embers to make it soft. Because gum is not perishable, it was carried by women in their net bags and also used for trade. Aboriginal use of **seeds for food** in the Adelaide region is poorly recorded, although the use is suggested by records from neighbouring temperate areas. Wattle seeds, while still green, were probably the main source of seed in the diet of Aboriginal people in the southern region of Australia. Wattle pods were found amongst plant debris excavated from Kongarati cave near Yankalilla and are possibly food remains. The edges of Fleurieu Swamps are ideal habitat for *Wirilda* and Golden Wattle, which yield green seeds in late spring/early summer, with a second harvest possible in late summer/early autumn in wet years. Gum from these two species is produced in summer. This edible gum was so valued that in some areas individual wattle trees that exuded large quantities it were regarded as the property of particular Aboriginal clans.



Wattle gum and reed roots and rhizomes were important food plants around Fleurieu Swamps. © Nicole Motteux, 2021

Many species of native orchids grow in and around Fleurieu Swamps, and many of these have an **edible tuber** that is fresh in spring and easily dug up with a stick. The Fleurieu Swamps support a large range of reeds, bog-rushes, rushes and saw-sedges. The **roots and rhizomes** of some of these are edible, especially in spring and early summer when fresh new growth is available. The roots or rhizomes were simply dug, washed and eaten fresh or roasted in a fire. Cat tail rush (*Typha orientalis*) is well-recognised as an important food plant for Aborigines in southern Australia, and it was found in some

Fleurieu Swamps as well as River Murray and Lower Lakes shores. The roots of the bulrush (*Typha* spp.) are a staple of many southern Aboriginal diets. Ethnographic records indicate that Aborigines burned swamps to facilitate the harvest process. The explorer Edward John Eyre wrote in 1845 that the rhizome was used throughout the year on the lower Murray River, but that it was best "after the floods have retired and the tops have become decayed and been burned off". The early European settler and leader George Angus noted in 1847 that "the staff of their existence is the bulrush root which the women gather amongst the reeds". Little is known of the Aboriginal use of the uplands of the Fleurieu Peninsula as little survey or dating of Aboriginal sites in these areas has been undertaken. This is in contrast to coastal areas where many sites have been recorded. The high frequency of coastal sites has led to arguments that the coast was the focus for Aboriginal occupation in the Adelaide region and the upland forests and scrubs were used for sheltering, firewood collection and hunting primarily in the winter months. The reduced size of the coastal plains, and thus the proximity of the ranges to the coast in the southern Fleurieu Peninsula, might have meant the inland areas were more intensively used after sea levels reached their maximum.



Wirilda (Acacia retinodes) is an important food, material and habitat plant in swamp systems. © Nicole Motteux, 2021

Other sources identify bracken shoots and new rhizome growth (*Pteridium esculentum*) as a source of starchy food from the wet woodland areas neighbouring Fleurieu Swamps. Similarly, the sugar lerps from several species of gum trees on the margins of Fleurieu Swamps including Pink Gum (*Eucalyptus fasciculosa*) and Red Gum (*E. camaldulensis*) were a sweet "snack" collected by Aboriginal people. Nectar from plants including Silky Tea Tree (*L. lanigerum*) in Swamps and from Grass Tree flowers (*Xanthorrhoea semiplana*) in neighbouring areas were used as a source of sweet energy.

Text: John Fargher Images: @nicolemotteuxphotography

This post especially informed by many papers and advice from [Philip Clarke](#), Ethnobotanist and Anthropologist.
A full list of references for this Post are available at [\[link to references\]](#)