

# Noongar Bush Medicine

## Disclaimer

This book has been written based on information accumulated by the authors from personal knowledge passed on from family members; third parties, including websites, records and documents that other parties have prepared; and Indigenous elders with traditional healing knowledge. While the authors have made their best endeavours to produce an accurate account of plants used medicinally by the Indigenous people of the south-west of Western Australia, they do not warrant or make any claim as to the accuracy or otherwise of the information contained in the work and accept no responsibility whatsoever for any inaccurate information contained in the book. It is the authors' recommendation that people wishing to collect or cultivate the plants described in this book and use them for medicinal purposes for themselves, their family or their friends consult with elders and traditional healers who have knowledge of the plants in their area before doing so.

# Noongar Bush Medicine

MEDICINAL PLANTS  
OF THE SOUTH-WEST OF  
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

VIVIENNE HANSEN AND  
JOHN HORSFALL



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Vivienne 'Binyarn' Hansen (née Bennell) was born in Beverley, Western Australia, into a traditional, large Noongar family, including Bennells and McGuires, Collards, Haydens, Reidys and other Noongar families in and around Brookton and other country towns to which the families had relocated. She and I had a strong link to Noongar heritage and culture through our great-grandfathers, grandfathers, great-grandmothers, grandmothers, parents, uncles and aunties, who were fiercely dedicated to retaining our spiritual and natural Noongar ways.

Binyarn's early days were spent around the Brookton reserves and Peppers farm, out near Aldersyde, where we would spend hours experimenting with anything that we thought was interesting, except the rotten duck eggs that would explode and we would smell of "Goono" (faeces). The good bush camps of mia-mias and humpies were built in amongst the Mangart (Jam Wattle) trees, the Teatree bushes, and the Sheoak trees. To this day we are very proud of our success, brought about through our strong upbringing in and around the bush camps.

Our elders were strong willed about our upbringing, on the grounds of discipline and strong family morals. Binyarn and her brother Greg were raised by Pop Clarrie and Nanna Olive McGuire in Brookton, and as it is with strong family association, we assisted and supported each other. Binyarn was a strong-willed girl, who grew into a strong-willed woman, who became heavily involved in Noongar culture and heritage that our families shared with us during our upbringing. This clearly shows in the development of this book, her learning and

understanding of bush tucker and bush medicine and her producing outstanding items within her learning.

This learning was taken from the early days, in the 1950s, as our Noongar families travelled around the bush - working, clearing land and shearing in the farms around Brookton, west Brookton, Aldersyde, Kweda (itself the Noongar name of a plant) and other places; camping in the bush; being taught the old, wise ways of our elders; being told, 'You can't eat that', 'This is medicine', 'This is good tucker', in relation to environmental plants; learning the art of which animals supplied the best oils and medicines that could be used for sore muscles, headaches and tummy aches; what gums to use for constipation, what gums to use to stop belly aches; when to use Sandalwood and Quandong seeds; and many other useful recipes that were passed on from our large Noongar families. During this time Binyarn met and married her husband, Mort Hansen, and raised her family of children, who now have children of their own and in whose upbringing Binyarn still plays an active part.

Today Binyarn spends much of her time developing her bush medicines and passing on her knowledge to the community, which is so important in this day and age - not keeping the secrets but passing it on to other members of the family to learn and to assist in the production of her medicines and ointments.

Binyarn is a very proud Noongar with strong cultural and heritage values which she has shared. I am a very proud relation and proud to call Binyarn my sister, and Mort brother.

A very special thank you to John for his dedication and support towards my sister, and I congratulate them both for their work.

*Neville Collard*

### Vivienne's Story

I am a Balladong Wadjuk Yorga from the Bibbulmun Nation, or Noongar people, of the south-west of Western Australia. I was born in Beverley, and my childhood was spent in Brookton and the surrounding regions of Noongar country. My mother was Myrtle, who was the youngest child of Kate Collard and Norman Bennell, and it was they who raised me until my grandmother died. After the death of my grandmother, I went to live with my mother's sister, Aunty Olive, and her husband, Uncle Clarrie McGuire. These family members and older uncles, aunts and cousins raised me to have a strong sense of respect, appreciation and knowledge of Noongar identity, culture and language. Like all my relatives, this close connection to country enabled me to explore the local bushlands and develop a deep understanding and knowledge of traditional bush medicine, remedies and practices.

Grandfather was a healer, like his father before him, and he and his two brothers, Granny Felix and Granny Bert told us stories about our Noongar people and culture. They taught us how to look for signs in our surrounds, such as the abundance of the blossoms on the gum trees, which could tell us about the coming seasons and weather patterns. My grandfather Norman and his brothers taught us about other signs and how to hunt for possum and goanna. We were also taught how to perform certain cultural ceremonies when we



Vivienne Hansen

are near water or places of special significance. This was to acknowledge the land, our Mother Earth, for all she provides for our people.

My aunties and older cousins took us walking through the bush, where we gathered the berries and yams, collected gum and sucked the sweet nectar from the flowers of certain trees and plants when they were in season. Even today, the seasons play a vital role in medicine, as some plants are only available after a rainy season or need fire to regrow. We were taught to just collect what we need at that particular time; there is no need to cut an entire tree down when we simply require a handful of leaves. I also learnt that it was very important not to trespass on another group's area without their permission.

After Nanna Kate's death, life with my aunt and uncle continued along these same ways, but we got to go out in

the bush more regularly, as Uncle Clarrie worked on a lot of farms around Brookton. At this time in my life, many of the farms had an abundance of bushland, as much of the land had not been cleared for crops. One of the farms we lived on was right next door to the state forest between Brookton and Kelmscott. Our time there gave me many opportunities to explore the bush and the plants that grew there, and I was always asking Uncle and Aunt what they were used for. I did not always get answers to all my questions, but that is when my interest in native plants began to grow and the foundations were laid for my work in this area today.

In 2008, I undertook formal training at the Marr Mooditj Foundation and completed Certificate IV in Bush and Western Herbal Medicine. I am very proud to have been the first Indigenous member of the National Herbalist Association of Australia and a presenter at the 7th International Conference on Herbal Medicine 2012, in Coolangatta, Queensland.

While enrolled at Marr Mooditj, I became aware that much of the information published on Aboriginal bush medicine did not contain a great deal of information on Noongar medicines and that the majority of the works published were by non-Aboriginal authors. This ignited a desire within me to gather and compile information on plants that our ancestors used in Noongar country. My desire was to produce a document using information gathered from published records and from my own empirical knowledge, which can be used as a reference and, even more importantly, as a historical record for all our Noongar people.

I believe that this compilation, which I have created with the assistance of John, is a unique body of work. We have only covered the bare minimum of plants in Noongar country, but we would love to see this work encourage other Noongar

people to do the same and in so doing broaden the knowledge about our beautiful culture and country, so that it won't be lost.

Sharing cultural knowledge is an important aspect of my life, and I really enjoy having opportunities to pass the knowledge on to my family and the wider community. I also draw a great deal of pleasure from seeing how my work benefits others, especially in improving their health and wellbeing.

Nowadays, I am often accompanied by family members, especially my young grandchildren and great-grandchildren, when I return to the places where I grew up. I share my stories with them, thereby ensuring that my knowledge is passed down to the next generation.

I attribute my passion and knowledge of bush medicine to my grandparents and family elders and to the ongoing support of my husband, Morton, and family. All of my knowledge is based on my interpretation of Noongar botanical practices handed down to me by my ancestors.

### John's Story

My first contact with an Australian Indigenous community was in 1963, when I spent two years with the Warnindilyakwa people, who speak the Anindilyakwa language, on Groote Eylandt, in the Northern Territory. I was employed by BHP and later Groote Eylandt Mining Company but spent many hours during my days off hunting and fishing with the men of the island. While on the island, I couldn't help noticing how fit and healthy the Warnindilyakwa people were. Although the



John Horsfall

people lived at the Anglican missions at Angurugu and Umbakumba, they often spent long periods away from the missions, hunting, fishing, crabbing and gathering bush tucker, and getting

plenty of exercise doing so. They also had good access to bush medicines.

Not long after commencing my nursing training in 1967, I became interested in alternative medicine and completed a diploma in Naturopathy and Herbal Medicine. While researching for session notes for one of the subjects I was teaching for the bachelor's degree in Indigenous Community Health at Curtin University titled 'Bush Medicine', I noticed that, although there were books covering Australian medicinal herbs and some covering Western Australian medicinal herbs, there was very little coverage of medicinal plants used by the Noongar people of south-west Western Australia. This book is intended to fill that gap by presenting an inventory of medicinal herbs that were used by the Noongar people of the Bibbulmun Nation.

The authors wish to acknowledge the help of a multitude of people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, without whose help it would have been impossible to write this book.

Vivienne would like to thank the following people for the tremendous support, advice and encouragement they gave her while she was working on this book: her husband, Morton Hansen, her children and grandchildren, and Uncle Theo Michael, Neville Collard, Winnie McHenry, Janet Hayden, Carol Garlett and Sandra Kremple.

John would like to thank his wife, Kamala Horsfall, and family for their encouragement and support while he was writing this book.

William Archer, who manages the Esperance Wildflowers blog, assisted with descriptions of the plants found around Esperance. His assistance is greatly appreciated. For those interested in wildflowers of the south-west, the blog can be found at [www.esperancewildflowers.blogspot.com.au](http://www.esperancewildflowers.blogspot.com.au). It contains many photographs and descriptions of the beautiful wildflowers that grow in the Esperance area.

Malcolm French, the author of *Eucalypts of Western Australia's Wheatbelt*, assisted greatly by supplying beautiful photographs of some of the eucalypts. His book and annual *EucMedia* newsletters, about Western Australian eucalypts, can be obtained through his website: [www.eucalyptsofwa.com.au](http://www.eucalyptsofwa.com.au).

Thanks also to all those photographers who gave permission to use their beautiful photographs for the illustrations, including Russell Dahms, William Archer, Andrew Hodgson, Russell Cummings, Bill and Mark Bell, Alfred Sin, Friends of





Chiltern Mt Pilot National Park, Tatiana Gerus, Alison Doley, Jean Hort, Leif Stridvall and numerous others.

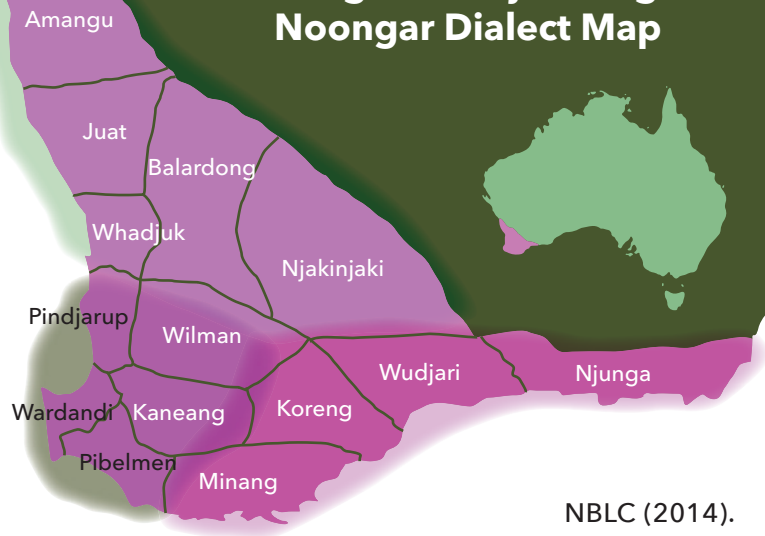
A special thanks to the Noongar Boodjar Language Cultural Aboriginal Corporation, at the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, for allowing us to use their map of the Noongar dialect regions. Their website can be found at [noongarboodjar.com.au](http://noongarboodjar.com.au).

Vivienne proudly acknowledges her Noongar heritage and wishes to pay her respects to her people past and present and declares this land she dwells on is and always will be the land of the Bibbulman Nation.

The country of the Noongar people, Aboriginal Australians of the south-west of Western Australia, stretches from Geraldton to Esperance, comprising an area of land of approximately 3 million hectares, with a coastline that covers 16,000 kilometres. According to Noongar elders, the islands of Carnac, Garden and Rottnest were created when the oceans swept in and separated them from the mainland. Traditionally, Noongar people had their own language, laws and customs and gathered regularly for celebrations, trade, marriage arrangements and other purposes. They lived well in their country, with a varied diet depending on the season and location.

For over 50,000 years before colonisation, the Noongar people were much healthier than most Aboriginal Australians are today. Living in the open, in a land largely free from disease, they benefited from a better diet, more exercise, less stress and a supportive community. With colonisation came many diseases, such as measles, mumps, diphtheria and whooping cough, and sexually transmitted infections, all of which reached epidemic proportions in some communities. Aboriginal Australians were very susceptible to respiratory diseases, and after colonisation, flu and tuberculosis caused many deaths and contributed immensely to the decline of the Aboriginal population, as there were no developed medicines to treat them. Traditional herbal medicine was of course ineffective against these introduced diseases (Cribb & Cribb, 1983).

## Noongar Boodja Wongki Noongar Dialect Map



NBLC (2014).

### Dialect groups

According to Tindale (1940), Noongar country is occupied by fourteen different dialect groups (see the map above), which he identified as Amangu, Ballardong (Balardong on the map), Yued, Kaneang, Koreng, Mineng, Njakinjaki, Njunga, Pibelmen, Binjareb, Wardandi, Whadjuk (Minang on map), Wilman and Wudjari. The Noongar (Pindjarup on map) people traditionally spoke dialects of the Noongar language, a member of the large Pama-Nyungan language family. The Pama-Nyungan languages are the most widespread family of Indigenous Australian languages, containing perhaps 300 languages. The name 'Pama-Nyungan' is derived from the names of the two most widely separated groups: the Pama languages of the north-east and the Nyungan languages of the south-west. The words *pama* and *nyunga* 'man' in their respective languages (Frawley, 2004).

The spelling Noongar was supported by Great Southern people at a meeting in Narrogin in 1992 and remains in common use on the south coast and Great Southern regions of Western Australia. Other spellings that have been used include Nyungar, Nyoongar, Nyoongah, Nyungah, Nyugah, Yungar and Noonga (NBLC, 2014).

### Seasons

There are six seasons for Noongar people, and their calendar, outlined below, is extremely important to all Noongar people, as it is a guide to what nature is doing at every stage of the year, as well as an aid in respecting the land in relation to plant and animal fertility cycles and land and animal preservation. For example, Noongar law required that no seed-bearing plants be dug up until after flowering. The Noongar people knew when the seasons changed by the weather patterns, the movement of the stars, the behaviour of the birds and the lifecycle of the plants.

### The Noongar seasons

Season	Months	Weather	Activities
Birak	December, January	Hot and dry	Sections of scrubland were burnt to force animals into the open.
Bunuru	February, March	Hottest part of the year, with warm easterly winds and sparse rainfall throughout.	Families moved to estuaries for fishing.
Djeran	April, May	Cooler, pleasant weather begins.	People continued fishing, and collected bulbs and seeds for food.

Season	Months	Weather	Activities
Makuru	June, July	Cold fronts continue. Usually the wettest part of the year. The rains replenish inland water resources.	Kangaroos and emus were hunted for their red meat and skins that were used for warm clothing.
Djilba	August, September	Usually the coldest part of the year, with clear, cold days and nights and warmer, rainy and windy periods.	People collected roots, and hunted emus, possums and kangaroos.
Kambarang	October, November	Longer dry periods, with fewer cold fronts crossing the coast.	People moved towards the coast and caught frogs, tortoises and freshwater crayfish.

Adapted from Rainbow Coast (2015).

### Animal and plant use

Noongar people enjoyed a diverse diet, which was based on the seasons. Kangaroos, ducks and fish were abundant, as were turtles, marron, emus, turkeys, wallabies, snakes and lizards. Fish traps were used to catch fish, and firestick farming was practised to improve the grass and drive out small game. Noongar people had an intimate knowledge

of edible plants and when and where they could be found. Some of the plants were potentially poisonous, but Noongar people knew what to do in order to make them edible. Wattle, Eucalypt, Banksia, Grevillea and Melaleuca trees provided nectar that was taken from the flowers either by sucking them directly or by soaking them in water to make a sweet drink called *neip*.

Trees also provided the materials necessary for the making of implements, such as spears, boomerangs, digging sticks and bowls. Bark shelters were built in cold winters, and bark was used to wrap food for cooking. The Noongar people carried firesticks when travelling long distances from the camps (*kullarks*). They were used to start fires to keep warm in the cold. When it rained, the firesticks were usually carried under cloaks. Gum from Grass Trees was used in making stone implements for a variety of purposes. The stone was quarried from a wide area. Grinding stones, spears, quartz rocks, ochres and clays were very popular trading items for Noongar people.

The Noongar people wore kangaroo-skin cloaks (*booka*) for warmth. The skins were pegged out on the ground to dry then cut with a stone knife into the desired shapes and the inner surfaces scraped until the skins became very soft and pliable. Once this was completed, the skins were sewn together with animal sinews and rubbed with grease and red ochre.

Knowledge of the medicinal uses of plants has kept Noongar people in good health for thousands of years. Knowing what to use to treat particular ailments extends beyond the plant kingdom and includes other types of food, animal oils, healing rituals such as smoking ceremonies, and healers. Noongars were mainly hunters and gatherers, dependent on the environment for food supply, moving from place to

place within defined boundaries. Tribal boundaries were not crossed, and the seasons played a vital role in medicine, as some plants were available only after a rainy season or needed fire for regrowth. Noongar people carried no medicine kits and had to have readily available remedies that could be used when needed. They were able to heal with whatever plants were in the locality of their camp. Their knowledge and skills of the plants, environment, seasons and animals around them were parts of their everyday life skills needed to survive.

### Physical, spiritual, social and emotional wellbeing

The Noongar people used many substances to enhance their wellbeing, including fire (*kaarl*); smoking (*booyi or kir*); charcoal (*kop or yaarkal*); ash (*yoort*) and coals (*birdal*); ochres and clay (*darduk*); mud, sand and termite dirt; animal fats and oils; and plants.

Fire played an integral role in the lives of Noongar people. It was used medicinally, spiritually and cosmetically. It provided light in the darkness of night and warmth on cold evenings and was the central focus for the passing on of knowledge from generation to generation, which was done sitting around campfires. Fires burning at night also provided protection from mosquitoes and other insects and were used to keep bad spirits away from the camp. It has played an important role in the healing process of the Noongar people.

Ceremonies using smoke were performed on newborn babies to keep them safe and make them grow up strong and healthy; babies were also rubbed with oils to render them stronger. Often, nursing mothers were smoked or steamed (HLPG, 2010) to strengthen their bodies during that



period in their lives. Leaves, twigs and small branches were heated over hot coals to release their oils, and the vapours were then inhaled.

Ashes, steam pits and steam beds were used medicinally. A steam pit was made by digging out a shallow pit, making a fire and then removing the ashes from the fire, lining the pit with leaves and placing kangaroo skins over the top. The sick person lay on top of the skins and was then covered with a further kangaroo skin.

Ochres were used mainly in ceremonies but sometimes in bush medicine. White ochre (*yoort* or *dardark*) was used for decoration of the body for ceremonial dance purposes. Certain soils were used medicinally, and some were also applied to the skin for protection from sunburn.

Emu (*weitj*) and goanna (*karda*) fat was an essential ingredient in many medicinal remedies and was considered to be a powerful healing agent for all health problems. It was applied directly to areas of pain and to wounds. Animal fat was also used to soften the skin.

There was great richness and diversity in the vegetation within Noongar country, and the Noongar people were able to



extract various saps and liquids from the plants and the earth to treat sickness. The methods of extraction and usage varied as the environments and seasons changed. Leafy branches were often placed over a fire while the patient squatted on top and inhaled the steam. Sprigs of aromatic leaves might be crushed and the smell inhaled, or the leaves would be inserted into the nose or placed into a pillow on which the patient slept. To make an infusion, leaves, flowers, twigs or bark were crushed and soaked in water which was then drunk or washed over the body. Ointment was prepared by mixing crushed leaves with animal fat. Other treatments included rubbing down the patient with crushed seed paste, fruit pulp or animal oil, or dripping milky sap or a gummy solution over them. Most plant medicines were externally applied (Cribb & Cribb, 1983). Except in ointments, medicines were rarely mixed. Very occasionally, two plants were used together. Noongar medicines were never measured, and there were no specific times of treatment; as most remedies were also applied externally, there was little risk of overdosing or poisoning.

## Healing practices

Noongar people often had need of bush medicines. Sleeping at night by fires meant they sometimes suffered from burns. Strong sunshine and certain foods caused headaches, and eye infections were common. Feasting on sour fruits or rancid meat brought on digestive upsets, and although tooth decay was not a big problem, coarse, gritty food may have worn teeth down. The Noongar people were also occasionally stung by jellyfish, insects and other creatures, and bitten by snakes. In the bush, there was always a chance of injury, and fighting sometimes may have ended in bruises, gashes and open wounds (Cribb & Cribb, 1983).

The healing of trivial, non-spiritual complaints and minor illnesses using herbs and other remedies was practised by all Aboriginal Australians, although older women were usually the experts. To ensure success, plants were often prescribed side by side with magic (Cribb & Cribb, 1983). One of the main features of traditional Noongar society was the role of the doctors, who had the power of healing through their hands, and the Noongar people believed that they also had the power to drive away rain or wind, bring down lightning or cause harm to an individual. Traditional healers sometimes employed herbs in their rites.

To deal with ailments, Noongar people used a range of remedies, which included medicinal plants, steam baths, clay pits, charcoal and mud, massages and secret chants (Cribb & Cribb, 1983). Many of the remedies did directly heal. Aromatic herbs, tannin-rich inner barks and resins, or gums (kinos) have well-documented therapeutic effects. Other plants undoubtedly harboured alkaloids or other compounds with pronounced healing effects. Unfortunately, very few native remedies have been tested systematically (Lassak &

McCarthy, 2001). Below is a list of traditional remedies used for various complaints:

- **Aching joints** were relieved with heated plant poultices, hot mud, or red ochre (*wilgi* or *mirda*) mixed with animal fat. Goanna fat was highly prized for the healing of painful joints.
- **Ailing health** was treated by eating cooked bobtail (*yoorn*), goanna and echidna (*nyingarn*).
- **Backaches** were relieved using gum poultices.
- **Broken limbs** were set in a jacket of mud and clay then bound tightly between sheets of bark.
- **Burns** were treated by smearing sap from certain plants, animal fat, saliva or mud on the affected parts.
- **Coughs and colds** were relieved by inhaling the vapours from the crushed leaves of specific plants, especially Eucalypts. Steam pits and steam beds were also used for the treatment of colds.
- **Diarrhoea and constipation** were relieved by consuming small amounts of gum from a Eucalypt.
- **Earaches** were relieved by pouring decoctions of certain plant parts into the ear canal.
- **Eye pain** was treated with breast milk or with the crushed leaves of certain plants moistened with water or saliva.
- **Fevers** were relieved by bathing the sufferer with infusions of crushed leaves.
- **Headaches** could be cured by inhaling vapours from the crushed leaves of some plants, by rubbing the crushed leaves on the head, by drinking decoctions of certain plants, by sleeping in the smoke from a fire, or by externally applying red ochre mixed with animal fat.

- **Heartburn** was relieved by chewing and swallowing charcoal; this also aided digestion.
- **Muscle aches** were treated with heated stones placed upon them. This remedy was also used for other sore parts of the body.
- **Poisons** that had been ingested were countered by chewing and swallowing charcoal.
- **Rashes** were relieved with heated plant poultices, hot mud, or the fat from the echidna and possum (*koomoorl*, *goormoorl* or *goomal*) rubbed on the skin.
- **Rheumatic problems** were alleviated by lying on a bed of green leaves. Steam pits and steam beds were also used for the treatment of rheumatism.
- **Skin problems** were treated with external application of red ochre mixed with animal fat.
- **Snake bites** were countered with directly applied ash.
- **Stings and bites** were treated by applying gum leaves that had been heated over fire.
- **Toothache** was relieved by using a mouthwash or by chewing the leaves of certain plants. Charcoal was chewed to clean the teeth.
- **Wounds** in the forms of ordinary cuts and grazes were treated by poultices of crushed leaves, mud, clay or ash. Crushed gum from Eucalypts would also be sprinkled on wounds to stem bleeding, and wounds were disinfected or cauterised with a burning stick. Specific types of soils were applied directly to open wounds or as poultices to retard infection. Wounds were also sometimes dressed with ochre or clay.



In the following pages, the authors have recorded information on many of the medicinal plants that were regularly used by the Noongar people of the south-west of Western Australia. They hope it will ensure that the traditional knowledge is not lost forever with the passing of elders and traditional healers.

