

Drooping Sheoak

ALLOCASUARINA VERTICILLATA

Family: Casuarinaceae.

Botanical name:

In 1982 most of the Victorian Casuarinas were controversially transferred to the new genus *Allocasuarina*. In 2003 a molecular study of the sheoaks supported the transfer.

Allo: Greek for 'other'. Casuarina: Latin for Cassowary, based on the assumption that the *Casuarina* foliage resembled Cassowary plumage. Verticillata: 'arranged in whorls' (the leaves of sheokes are small teeth or scales arranged along the branchlets). The number of leaves in the whorls is important in identifying sheokes.

Common name:

Drooping is related to the drooping growth habit of the species. Originally it was called She Oak due to the nature of the timber superficially resembling Oak (*Quercus*). In 1931 Ewart's book *Flora of Victoria* was published. This was the first time the spelling of Sheoke was used. Subsequently both spellings are now used in various publications. Originally there were both she and he oaks describing various species around Australia, however the he oaks have fallen out of favour in literature only being survived by the bullock (sorry, in Victoria it is called buloke)!

Description: Multiple branching (rarely straight) small woodland tree 5-10m tall with a rounded drooping crown. The species is wind pollinated and Dioecious (male and female flowers on separate trees) and flowers during winter. Female flowers are small orange-red rounded tufts found along the branches. Male flowers are tan coloured strings of beads hanging down from the ends of the branches.

The woody barrel shaped seed bearing cones are the largest of the she oaks we encounter in our region (up to 50mm diam). The young cones are a shiny copper colour, later maturing to a dull, dusty brown. Each woody cone holds a hundred or more winged seeds hidden beneath sharp spikey valves which open with heat or old age.

The bark is not as corky as some she oaks (like the other local, black she oak, *A. littoralis*) but is rough up to the branches.

The "leaves" have evolved into very small scales situated in whorls around the branchlets. The branchlets are what we assume are the "needle like leaves" drooping at the end of the branches. Like all she oaks the wind whistles through the canopy.

Where do they grow: In the upper Barwon region, drooping she oak is found along the Otway Plain around Winchelsea and Wurdale. Quite a large remnant can be found at the Casuarina Woodland at Buckley. Drooping she oak usually grows in poor, dry soils and like all the Casuarinas has an association with the nitrogen fixing soil borne bacteria *Frankia*.

Revegetation: With the fragmentation of the population due to land clearing, inbreeding of scattered trees and small remnants has occurred. Seed from these small remnants has lower genetic diversity and should not be used for growing seedlings for revegetation projects. Larger

remnants and reserves still show appropriate genetic diversity for use in seed collection. Seed should be collected from a minimum of 30 individual plants and from genetically viable communities. An excellent middle storey species for wind blown projects in low fertility soils.

European Uses: Historically used for firewood (wood is dense, hot burning, trees coppice), shingles, wagon bearings, bullock yokes (another possible name source?), drought fodder. Should be planted more in our drier districts for its beautiful “birds eye” wood which is sought after for wood turning and other high value timber products.

Indigenous Uses: The hard wood was used for making spears, boomerangs and artefacts. Wood pulp was soaked in water and the liquid gargled for toothaches. Placing she oak logs into creeks attracted tasty wood eating grubs which were harvested. Young cones and foliage was chewed to alleviate thirst during long walks in a dry landscape. Seeds were roasted and eaten.

References

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