

Flannel flower (Botanical name: *Actinotus*)

Flannel flowers are one of our most recognisable and loved native flowers, and I have just discovered – on my much needed bush walking exercises after the festive season – that right now they have burst into bloom in our Blue Mountains. To find them in the great outdoors is such a delight.

*“I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats wherever it may fancy
When all at once I saw a crowd
Of *Actinotus helianthi*”*



There are about 20 species in the genus *Actinotus* (meaning ‘in the form of rays’), nearly all of which are endemic to Australia, occurring in all areas except the tropics, in a wide range of soil and climate types. By far the best known is *Actinotus helianthi*, this translates from the Greek *aktinos* (a ray), *helios* (the sun) and *anthos* (a flower). In some ways the flower does look like a miniature sunflower with the bracts resembling the rays of the sun. Native of south eastern Queensland and the coast and range of New South Wales, *Actinotus helianthi* is commonly known as the Sydney Flannel Flower. Why Sydney, one might ask, most probably because it is often found in the National Parks around Sydney. For many years this plant had a reputation as a real challenge to cultivate. Some nurseries nicknamed it “I’m a Fusspot!” and often recommended to grow it in a pot where, if properly nurtured, it might last for 2 or 3 years. In the home garden, attempts to grow this plant in heavy soils will almost certainly fail; only when the soil is freely draining, not too rich and there is some sun, it might grow, producing many seeds, and if left undisturbed, seedlings fortunately duly come up to a shrubby plant reaching around 1 to 1.5m in height. The stem, branches and leaves are a pale grey in colour, covered in downy hair. The flowers are small and occur in clusters surrounded by velvety, petal-like bracts that are actually modified leaves. When you look at the actual flower, in the centre, you are looking at maybe 50 odd tiny flowers, clustered into that one little centre.

In the wild, the plant grows in full sun or semi-shade on poor sandy soil, in rocky areas or in loose chunks of sandstone. Both leaves and flower heads are felted with dense hairs which help in the reduction of moisture loss in a dry climate and in scarcely water-retentive soils. Daisy-like flower heads with soft flannel-like bracts appear from early spring into late summer. The colours are predominantly white, cream or



Pink
flannel
flower

greenish with the exception of the very rare *Actinotus forsythii* which has central flowers of a deep pink and the ‘petals’ a very pale pink. This is a very rare plant that few people have heard of and even fewer have seen, believed to belong only to the Upper Blue Mountains, (listed as a high risk/vulnerable plant in the alpine area of Victoria), where it is reported that it flowers for one season a year only after two events – fire and then rain. It has been recorded

that one of the most spectacular displays of pink flowers in recent years was on Newnes Plateau in 2015 after the State Mine fire in late 2013. More recently, in 2017, a pink sighting was reported on Kings Tableland. The plant is named for William Forsyth, a plant collector in the early 1900s. Flannel flowers live for about 4 years. Germination time varies between 2 weeks and 1 year, and is not reliable, sometimes the seeds respond easily and sometimes not at all. Seed dormancy is probably the plant adaptation to protect the seed from germinating in unfavourable conditions. Since the flowers often appear in their thousands after bushfires, some authorities recommend over burning the seed – sow the seed, cover with a layer of dried leaves and ignite – as it was thought that the seed needed the heat from fire to stimulate germination. More recently, some authorities have come to believe that it is not the heat but the chemical composition of smoke produced during the fire that breaks the inhibitor in the seed.

The overall appearance of flannel flowers is similar to a daisy, however the plant is not a member of the daisy family but rather a species of flowering plant of the family *Apiaceae* (same as carrot, parsnip and celery).

Lesser known *Actinotus* species are the miniature *A. minor* (lesser flannel flower), it has smaller flowers borne on wiry slender stems. *A. schwarzii* grows in rugged area of the McDonnell Ranges in Central Australia and sadly is regarded as an endangered species. Another rare species is *A. paddisonii* with green flowers from Bourke. Western Australia has *A. leucocephalus* and *A. superbus*.

Federation stars: As part of the celebration of the Centenary of Federations in 2001, each state of Australia was asked to nominate a floral emblem. Our state (NSW) chose the flannel flower as it had featured on the official invitation to the original Federation celebrations held in 1901 in Sydney Centennial Park.

Mount Annan Botanic Garden has developed a range of flannel flowers called Federation stars, which include Parkes Star (named after Sir Henry Parkes), Star Bright and Lucky Star. Star Bright and Parkes Star are perfect for pots while Lucky Star is a long-stemmed variety for the cut flower markets. Apparently picking native plants is an offence, hopefully Lucky Star will help to stop the habit which tends to deplete the wild flower population.

PS. Very shortly after this article was completed, it was reported that on a few stony, bushfire-ravaged slopes overlooking our Blue Mountains valleys, pink flannel flowers bloom in their thousands, bringing new life and colour to landscape still charred by the summer fire of 2019/20.