

Acacia

What's in a name?

Acacia is an Australian icon. It's up there with emus and kangaroos! It's our **national floral emblem!** We celebrate **National Wattle Day** and our international sporting teams compete in gold and green. How is it then that we came so close to losing the name *Acacia* for our wattle trees? And yet, until the International Botanical Congress in Melbourne, 2011, this almost happened. The controversy starts with the *International Code of Nomenclature for Algae, Fungi and Plants*, a set of rules agreed by the world's scientific community to manage the names of these organisms.

There are about 1,300 species in what has been known until recently as the genus *Acacia* including ~ 1,000 from Australia, ~ 150 from Africa, and a few from south-east Asia and the Americas. The first *Acacia* to be named was an African species, *Acacia scorpioides* (syn. *A. nilotica*), which, according to the *International Code*, then became the **type species** for the genus



Acacia longifolia – Sydney Golden Wattle, from eastern and southern Australia.



Vachellia nilotica – previously *Acacia scorpioides* –
The original type species for the genus *Acacia*
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Acacia. However, in recent years, botanists determined that there were sufficient differences between groups of *Acacia* species to separate the genus into **five genera**. Most Australian species clearly fell into a different group from the African species, but because an African species was the first named, rules of international nomenclature required another genus name for most of our Australian species. For quite a



Acacia penninervis – the new type species for *Acacia*.
 Photo: Donald Hobern from Canberra, Australia / CC BY (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>)

has a special provision that allows another species to be named as the *type species* when **many more species** would have to move to a new genus than would be retained in the original genus. Two Australian botanists, **Tony Orchard** and **Bruce Maslin**, proposed that an Australian wattle, *Acacia penninervis*, be recognised as the new **type species**. Of major importance in making this change was the overwhelming abundance of *Acacia* species in Australia compared to Africa. Understandably, this was opposed by botanists in **Africa** where the genus *Acacia* had included iconic **Fever Trees, Gum Arabic** and **Thorn Trees**. However, the proposal was accepted at the 2005 International Botanical Congress in Vienna and confirmed in 2011 at the International Botanical Congress in Melbourne.

while, it looked as if our beloved *Acacia* would be given the uninspiring name of *Racosperma*.

Prior to the meeting in Melbourne, a compromise was proposed, suggesting that **Australian** species could be referred to as *Austroacacia*, and **African/American** species as *Protoacacia*. Fortunately for us, the International Code for Nomenclature

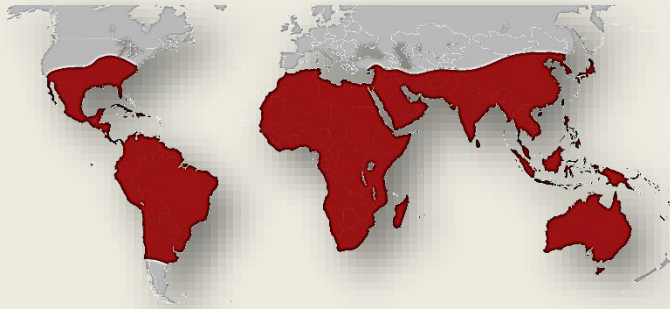


Acacia cognata – Bower Wattle, or River Wattle, from SE Australia

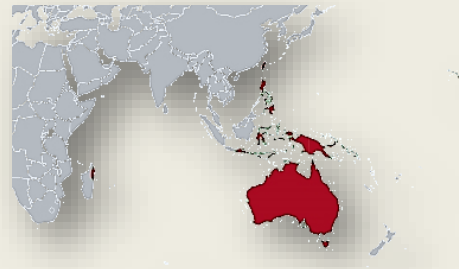


African Thorn Tree, now *Vachellia tortilis*,
 Photo: Robur.q / CC BY-SA
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The original genus, *Acacia*, has now been replaced by five new genera. Most Australian species (~960) fall within the genus *Acacia*. Most African species (~ 100) belong in either *Vachellia* or *Senegalia*, and in the Americas, *Acaciella* and *Mariosousa*.



World distribution of **Mimosoideae** (syn. **Mimosaceae**).
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Acacia: Map by Ninjaticoshell / CC BY-SA
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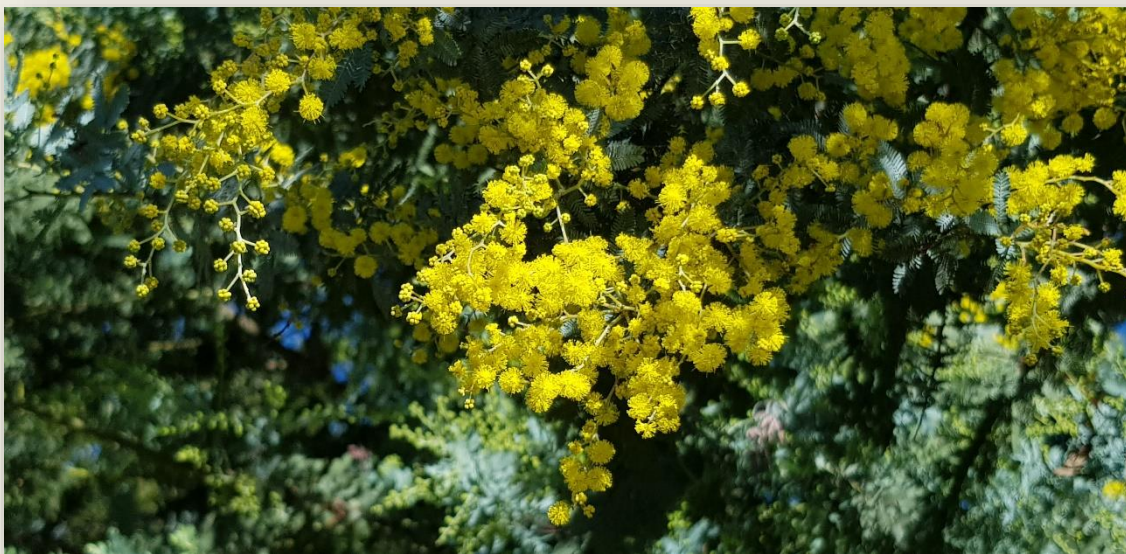
Maslin BR, Orchard AE, West JG. 2003. Nomenclatural and classification history of *Acacia* (Leguminosae: Mimosoideae), and the implications of generic subdivision. WorldWideWattle.

Turland, NJ. 2011. A suggested compromise on the nomenclature of *Acacia*. *Taxon* 60 (3): 913–914

Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acacia>

Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mimosoideae>

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Acacia baileyana – Cootamundra Wattle from a small area of southern NSW



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