



Plant Communities

When we talk about a community of people we mean a group of different people living together in one area or location. These people may use the same shops, parks, public transport, roads, water-supply and so on. When we talk about a community of plants it is much the same: we mean different plants living together in one area or location, using the same soil, air and water.

Bushland on the Swan Coastal Plain and Darling Range is made up of several different plant communities. Over time, each of these communities has adapted to particular conditions, such as the type of soil, the depth of the soil and whether the site is wet or dry. Plant species that need the same conditions are often found together, for example those plants that need to be in or close to water, or those that grow in clay soils rather than sandy soils. A particular sort of habitat will have a particular blend of plant species, or plant community.

Botanists (scientists who study plants) usually describe plant communities according to the height and density of the tallest species. This means that some plant communities are described as forests because the trees in this community are close enough together for their canopies to touch or overlap. An example of this type of community would be marri forests. If the trees are spaced further apart so that their canopies do not touch, then the plant community would be described as a woodland, for example woodlands of flooded gum found around many wetlands.

Botanists make a further distinction between a forest or woodland and a low forest or woodland. A low forest or woodland is one where the trees are less than 10 metres tall. For example, low woodlands of banksia and pricklybark.

Remember that a plant community is made up of many different plants, but when describing this community in words, only the names of the dominant plants are included. The dominant plants are usually the tallest.

If you look carefully at a plant community you will notice that the plants tend to occur in layers. The tallest layer, or overstorey, is generally made up of trees. The layers underneath this are called the understorey. This may include layers of large or small shrubs and layers of herbs, grasses or sedges. Not all plant communities have trees, shrubs, climbers, grasses, herbs and sedges, nor do all of the layers occur in each community. Two different plant communities may have the same sorts of layers but different dominant species, or different species in some of the layers. This is what makes each plant community unique.