

# Golden Guinea Flower

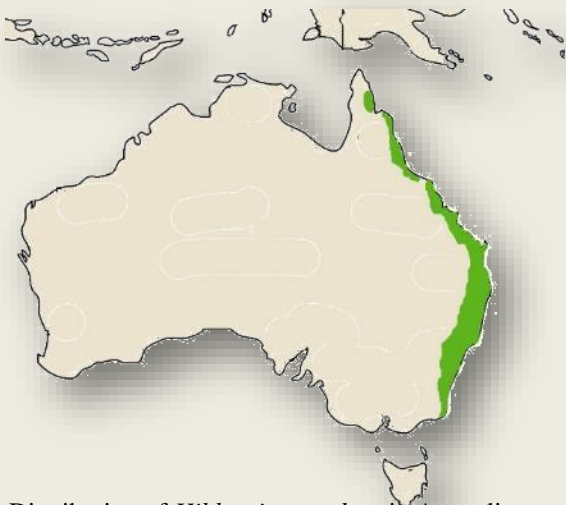
## *Hibbertia scandens*

### A glorious flower with a dark secret

This sturdy scrambling vine with glorious golden flowers is widespread along the east coast of Australia, from Cape York in far north Queensland, to just over the Victorian border in the south. It can be found growing in open forest and woodland, along rainforest margins, even on coastal dunes. The Golden Guinea Flower, *Hibbertia scandens* has long been popular as a garden plant, extensively planted in Australia and elsewhere in the world, even recognised as a *weed* in New Zealand.



It was introduced to England by botanist Joseph Banks in 1790 (as *Hibbertia volubile*) and first formally described in 1799 by the German botanist, Carl Willdenow who named it *Dillenia scandens*. In 1805, this name was revised by the Swedish botanist Jonas Dryander, to the name we know it by today, *Hibbertia scandens*.



Distribution of *Hibbertia scandens* in Australia, modified from Atlas of Living Australia:  
[https://biocache.ala.org.au/occurrences/search?q=lsid:https://id.biodiversity.org.au/node/apni/2889161#tab\\_mapView](https://biocache.ala.org.au/occurrences/search?q=lsid:https://id.biodiversity.org.au/node/apni/2889161#tab_mapView)

Plants in the genus *Hibbertia* are usually shrubs or sometimes vines, with simple leaves; most have yellow flowers, but can be orange, pink or white. Stamens are particularly important in identifying *Hibbertia* species, and can be abundant or quite few, usually surrounding the carpels, or grouped together on one side of the carpels.

In Australia, the genus *Acacia* has the most species ~ 1,000, followed by *Eucalyptus* (in the broad sense) with ~ 850 species. In 2009, *Hibbertia* was ranked 10<sup>th</sup> with 126



Distribution of *Hibbertia* in Australia, modified from ALA:

[https://biocache.ala.org.au/occurrences/search?q=taxa%3A%22Hibbertia%22#tab\\_mapView](https://biocache.ala.org.au/occurrences/search?q=taxa%3A%22Hibbertia%22#tab_mapView)

Species of *Hibbertia* can be found across much of Australia, and also in New Guinea, New Caledonia and Fiji. Surprisingly, one even occurs in Madagascar! The south-west of Western Australia is considered to be the principal centre of diversity, but there are less diverse centres in south-eastern and northern Australia.



An *Hibbertia* from Torndirrup National Park, south-west Western Australia

*Hibbertia* is a member of the plant family Dilleniaceae, and we had always considered this to be a relatively ancient family. It seems that the family has some characteristics that it shares with *Eudicots*, the more highly developed flowering plants, and some characteristics typical of more ancient assemblages, the *Early Angiosperms*.



Botanist, politician, merchant, *slave trader* – George Hibbert Image: Stephendickson, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia

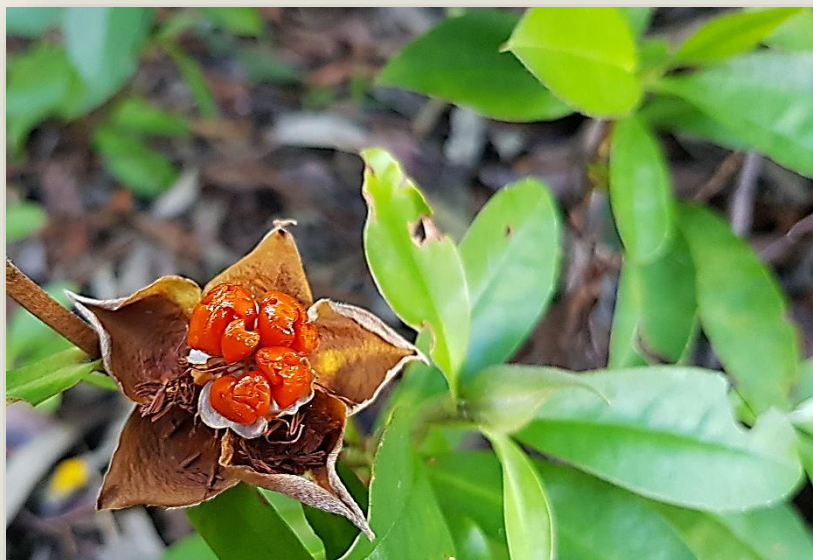
However, there is a dark side to *Hibbertia*. These lovely shrubs were named in honour of *George Hibbert* (1757-1837), an English politician, respected amateur botanist and book collector. He was a founder of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution in 1824. His own garden was quite extensive, featuring many species from Botany Bay and from South Africa's Cape of Good Hope, particularly favouring *Banksias* and *Proteas*. He funded botanical expeditions to the Cape, and to China. So far, this all sounds pretty good, but Hibbert's wealth was generated from his slaves, men, women and children, enabling him to generate a public identity as a philanthropist and plant collector, and masking his role as a slave trader and owner. He transported slaves from Africa to the New World where some were sold, others worked his family's numerous sugar plantations; sugar and cotton were transported back to England. He

species (126) but there have been so many additions in recent years that it may surprise you to know that now it now ranks third, with 400 species. It is quite surprising to think that these relatively unpretentious little plants, mostly inconspicuous until they flower, can contribute such a large number of species to the Australian flora.

became a vociferous and leading member of the *pro-slavery lobby*, vehemently opposing William Wilberforce in his bid to abolish slavery. In current times, it is difficult to credit that his family was awarded compensation of £103,000, Hibbert himself was awarded £16,000.

Botanist Kevin Thiele asks, *should Hibbert be honoured with the name of a genus of plants, to which new species are still being added today – effectively meaning he is honoured afresh with each new publication?*

The problem is that the official *International Code of Nomenclature for algae, fungi, and plants*, a set of rules that govern the scientific naming of these organisms, does not allow *Hibbertia*, or any other species that has an inappropriate name for that matter, to be renamed. Kevin Thiele suggests, *We counter that, just like toppling statues in Bristol Harbour or removing Cecil Rhodes' name from public buildings, renaming things is important and necessary if we are to right history's wrongs.*



Fruit of *Hibbertia scandens*, the Golden Guinea Vine.

A catalogue of Australian Flora Statistics, Australian National Herbarium 2009. [Australian Flora Statistics - Australian Plant Information \(anbg.gov.au\)](http://anbg.gov.au)

Aiton W T. 1811. *Hortus Kewensis* or, A Catalogue of the Plants cultivated in the Royal Botanic Garden at Kew, by the Late William Aiton. Vol. III. London.

Andrews H C. 1800. *The Botanist's Repository for New and Rare Plants*. Vol. 2. London

Atlas of Living Australia: [Hibbertia scandens: Climbing Guinea Flower | Atlas of Living Australia \(ala.org.au\)](http://ala.org.au)

Stebbins G L, Hoogland R D. 1976. Species diversity, ecology and evolution in a primitive Angiosperm genus: *Hibbertia* (Dilleniaceae). *Pl. Syst. Evol.* 125: 139-154.

Thiele K, 2021. Hibbert's flowers and Hitler's beetle: What do we do when species are named after history's monsters. *The Conversation*. ABC News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-12-16/hibberts-flowers-hitlers-beetle-species-named-history/100702442>

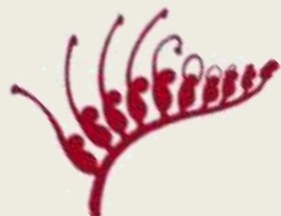
Toelken H R, 1998. Notes on *Hibbertia* (Dilleniaceae) 2. The *H. aspera* – *empetrifolia* complex. *Journal of the Adelaide Botanic Gardens* 18(2): 107-160.

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

Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hibbertia\\_scandens](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hibbertia_scandens)

Wikipedia: [George Hibbert - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Hibbert)

Alison Downing, Brian Atwell, Karen Marais, Kevin Downing  
School of Natural Sciences



**MACQUARIE**  
University  
SYDNEY · AUSTRALIA

