

Indigofera australis

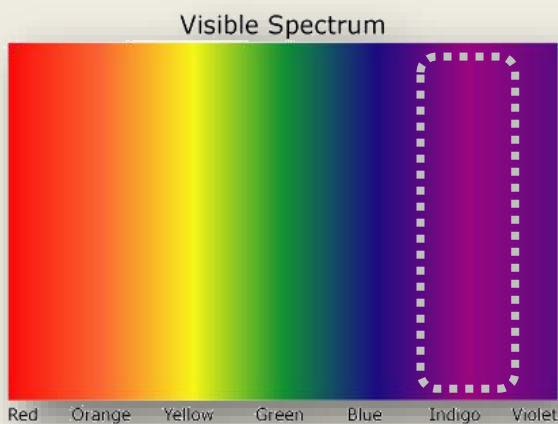
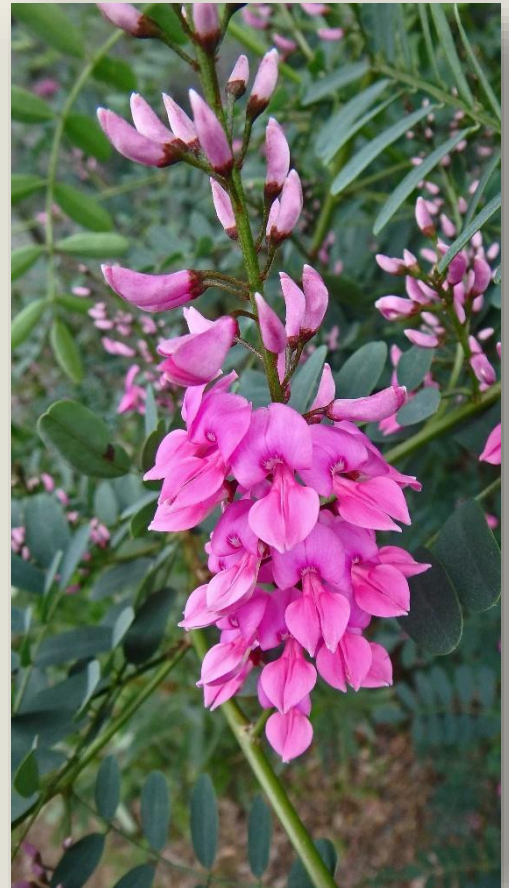
Australian Indigo

‘Australian Indigo’ suggests that this attractive leguminous shrub might be the source of a *purplish-blue* dye. However, early European settlers in Australia used its stems and leaves to produce a soft *yellow* dye.

Indigofera australis is widely dispersed across southern Australia in many habitats, including *Eucalyptus* woodlands and forests and on the margins of deserts and rainforests. One might wonder how naturally occurring populations in Western Australia relate to those

found in the eastern states but this was resolved in a recent publication.

The Western Australian and South Australian populations were classified as a different subspecies (*Indigofera australis* subsp. *hesperia*) from populations the east coast (*Indigofera australis* subsp. *australis*).



Indigofera means *indigo-bearing*, and *australis* means *southern*. So where does this dye-bearing species come from? There are about 40 species of *Indigofera* endemic to Australia but more than 700 worldwide, mostly occurring in tropical and subtropical regions. Few of these many species of *Indigofera* are used to produce dye, the best known being *Indigofera tinctoria*, true indigo. True indigo has been in cultivation since at least 4,000 BCE in Peru but its origins are not certain. It is now naturalised in many

regions of tropical and temperate Africa and Asia.

To produce the dye, leaves are soaked and fermented in water to allow conversion of the glycoside **indican** to the blue dye **indigotin**. Prior to the American Revolution, indigo produced in North and South Carolina was second only to rice in importance as an export crop.



Aniline, commonly used to dye leather and wood, was originally produced naturally from another species, *I. suffruticosa* (previously known as *Indigofera anil*) a native of subtropical and tropical South, Central and North America.

Our common Australian species, *Indigofera australis*, is an excellent garden shrub, growing from about 1 – 1.5 metres tall, flowering prolifically in late winter and early spring. As a member of the pea family, it is also useful in improving soil nutrition by fixing nitrogen in the soil. It is also an excellent source of pollen and nectar and as a host plant for the larvae of numerous species of butterflies.

Australian Native Plant Society (Australia): <http://anpsa.org.au/i-aus.html>

P G Wilson & R Rowe 2010 New taxa and typifications in *Indigofera* (Fabaceae) for South Australia. Journal of the Adelaide Botanic Gardens 24: 67–73

Plantnet: <http://plantnet.rbgsyd.nsw.gov.au/cgi-bin/NSWfl.pl?page=nswfl&lvl=sp&name=Indigofera-australis>

Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indigofera_australis

Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indigofera_tinctoria

Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indigofera_suffruticosa

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