



# Walls that Talk

## Fletcher's Flowers

William Fletcher was born at Bellbird in October 1924. A small town in the Hunter region, Bellbird had recently experienced the event that would make it famous in the Hunter Valley for decades to come. The Bellbird Mine Explosion of September 1923, which claimed the lives of 21 miners and their horses. The memory of this disaster would still be loudly echoing in the town of Bellbird, as William grew up surrounded by the coal trains and stories of miners lost. Bellbird is hemmed in by railway lines on one side and dense bushland on the other. Did the flora of the Lower Hunter capture the eye of young William from the beginning?

Leaving Bellbird to become a naval officer in 1942 at the age of 18, William returned to Australia after serving in the Pacific. He studied at East Sydney Technical College and the Julian Ashton Art School. He went on to become a prolific artist, painting the native flowers of eastern New South Wales in oils, gouache, and watercolour - capturing the striking shapes and colours of his subject.

This exhibition is a celebration of the work of a local-born artist and the flowers he painted, highlighting where they can be found in the Hunter, the origins of their scientific names, and how their shapes and colours continue to attract admirers and pollinators in equal measure.

### Naming guide

Each panel shows the artwork title and the plant's scientific name, usually in Latin with two parts: the genus (capitalised) and the species (lowercase). Scientific names, often italicised, provide a universal way to identify plants. Common names reflect local tradition and can vary widely, even within the same country.



## NATIVE HIBISCUS – *Hibiscus heterophyllus*

Australia is home to several flowers commonly called native hibiscus. The title of this painting could be referring to the native rosella – *Hibiscus heterophyllus*. This flower has vibrant yellow petals leading to a red-hearted centre – a delicious trap for bees and honeyeater birds that visit for a drink of nectar and leave with a coating of pollen. The tree also produces food for humans too – the flower buds are collected and made into sweet jams.

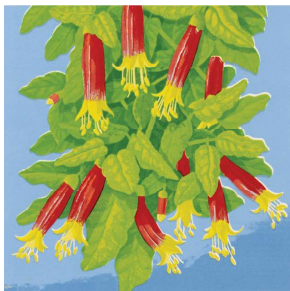
Another native hibiscus with the same yellow and red patterning is found further north – the *Hibiscus tiliaceous* or Sea hibiscus. This plant has a dramatic one-day life cycle, blooming yellow in the morning, deepening to orange throughout the day until finally turning red before dropping to the ground.



## TWINING GUINEA FLOWER – *Hibbertia dentata*

Some names describe the characteristics of a flower, and others their history. The common and Latin names of this plant bring us two stories. Plants in the genus *Hibbertia* are often given the common name Guinea flowers because they belong to a family of plants that are also found in Papua New Guinea. The scientific name *Hibbertia* comes from George Hibbert, an English merchant who – alongside a dedication to the study of Botany and being a co-founder of the British life-saving charity the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI), was also a staunch supporter of the slave trade. It's not unusual to find links between the early scientific age and other colonial preoccupations. Hibbert was well-known for his London garden filled with Banksias and other Australian plants.

The Latin name *dentata* means “toothed” and refers to the jagged shape of the leaves. These are visible in William Fletcher’s painting.



## NATIVE FUCHSIA – *Correa reflexa*

This is a flower that looks like a bell, dangling in pretty clusters from bright green leaves. From each bell-shaped flower hang eight long yellow stamens – inviting a curious or hungry bee, fly, or bird to pass by for a small feast of pollen or nectar. The leaves are highly textured, with a surface that looks like a spiky lizard or cactus. When the flowers appear, their bright pink petals with yellowy-green tips stand out against the textured foliage.

Before the Europeans arrived, the native fuchsia had its own name. One day the sails of the Endeavour brought the clever cartography of Captain James Cook and the Botany of Joseph Banks to the East Coast of what would become Australia. Scientists first sent drawings and specimens to England, before live specimens were sent to England. There in the glasshouses of England they were given the Latin name *Correa reflexa*. *Correa* honours the exiled botanist José Francisco Correa de Serra, while *reflexa* means ‘turned back’ in Latin.



## WILD IRIS – *Patersonia sericea*

The wild iris, also known as silky purple flag, has the scientific name *Patersonia sericea*. In his painting, William Fletcher has captured the plants unique features: chocolate-brown, bean-shaped flower pods, small yellow stamens towards the centre of the petals, and the pale, long neck of the flower. Delicate and bright, each flower only lasts one day before drooping and disappearing – a short but beautiful life.

The genus name *Patersonia* honours William Paterson, the first Lieutenant Governor of New South Wales. Famous for his colonial explorations, adventures and misadventures, Paterson joined an expedition up the Hunter River in 1801, reaching just north of what would become Maitland. This exploration led to the first European discovery of coal in the South Maitland region – an industry that would come to define the Hunter. Paterson’s true love was science. He often sent plant and geological specimens to botanist Joseph Banks, and in return, his name was given to the striking purple flowers that dots the landscape he once explored.



## GREVILLEA PUNICEA – *Grevillea speciosa*

Is it an insect or a plant? This species of Grevillea prefers to be both. The common name, red spider flower describes the flower perfectly. Among its olive-shaped leaves sit bright red clusters of flowers that droop downwards like a set of spindly insect legs. William Fletcher has given this painting the title *Grevillea punicea*, an older name for the plant. The modern family name has been changed to *speciosa*. This happens often, as scientists learn more about genetic relationships through DNA research. In early botanical paintings, the name *punicea* was used, meaning “reddish” in Latin.

The red spider flower isn’t a Hunter species. It grows on the sandstone cliffs and seaside locations along the Central Coast region. However, this is also a popular garden shrub – hardy and is often covered in flowers, loved by both people and birds.



## HELICHRYSUM – *Xerochrysum bracteatum*

William Fletcher called this painting *Helichrysum*, but that name is slightly misleading. *Helichrysum* is a large genus of plants found worldwide, including Africa and Europe. The flower in this painting is most likely a golden everlasting, also known as a strawflower. These flowers delight us with their large, colourful blooms and unusual papery texture of their petals. Looking into the open bloom of a golden everlasting is like looking into the sun, with its butter-yellow petals and rich orange centre. This flower is widespread across Australia, thriving in environments from mountains to deserts. The flowers bloom during our sunniest months from December to March.

The scientific name *Xerochrysum bracteatum* has two origins. *Xerochrysum* is a Greek compound word meaning “dry” and “golden”. *Bracteatum* is a Latin word meaning “having bracts” - bracts being the same name given to leaves that grow at the base of flowers.





## HANDSOME FLAT PEA – *Platylobium formosum*

The handsome flat pea was so admired that both the common and scientific names reference its appearance, the word *formosum* meaning “beautiful” in Latin.

This plant was first described by James Edward Smith in his 1793 book *A Specimen of the Botany of New Holland*. This was the first book published in Europe focused solely on the flora of Australia, and the handsome flat pea was one of a few specimens featured, alongside the iconic Waratah.

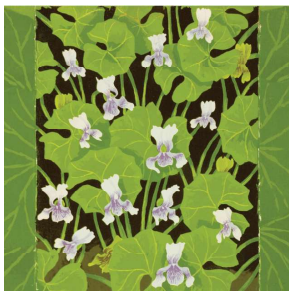
This plant belongs to a large global family, the Fabaceae, which includes mimosa plants, native acacias, lupins, peas and other Australian native peas, including the famous egg and bacon plant *Eutaxia obovate*. In spring, anyone walking in the Hunter bush will come across the yellow and red pea flowers of this aptly named beautiful family of plants.



## SENECIO – *Senecio linearifolius*

This flower grows along the East Coast of Australia but is less well-known and admired than other more popular native blooms. Maybe it’s because the small daisy-like flowers resemble the foreign ragwort weeds that trouble garden beds and native reserves.

Despite the resemblance, these blooms are genuine native species. The native *Senecio* grows into a tall green bush up to 1.5m, covered in small yellow daisy-like flowers. As can be seen in the painting *Senecio*, the leaves are comparatively long and wide with slightly toothed edges and a distinct central midrib line. The leaves are such a striking feature that the plant’s family name *linearifolius* comes from a Latin word meaning “linear leaves”.



## WILD VIOLETS – *Viola hederacea*

Some plants like their time in the sun, others prefer the protective shade of the forest floor. *Viola hederacea* is one such shade-lover. It grows best in shady spots, covering the ground with short, bright, moon-shaped leaves. In the painting, the leaves and flowers fill the canvas, evoking the feeling of being surrounded by greenery.

As the seasons turn towards the warmth of Spring, delicate stems rise from the carpet of green sends up delicate stems which then hold a profusion of white and purple flowers. The family name *hederacea* means “ivy-like” in Latin, inspired by the plant’s ability to spread and cover the ground, similar to European ivy/

The plant is common in the bushland of the Hunter region and has become popular in gardens, where its spreading leaves and jolly purple flowers brighten spring and summer.