San Diego's Eucalyptus

*San Diegans planted olive trees by the hundred, citrus by the thousand and
eucalyptus trees by the multi-million . . . the coming of the eucalyptus from
Australia was the long awaited Millennium—practically a supernatural
beneficence to every area of life: economical, medicinal, and ethereal.*
--Leland G. Stanford, San Diego librarian and author.

California's ubiquitous eucalyptus tree appeared shortly after the Gold Rush of 1849. From
Australian miners, Californians would learn of the huge tree that grew easily in temperate
climates with little regard to soil or water. It seemed the perfect crop for construction timber and
fuel in the rapidly growing state. The tree that would one day be called "America's largest
weed," was the "wonder tree" of nineteenth-century California.

The first successful planting of eucalyptus in California probably occurred in San Francisco. W.
C. Walker of the Golden Gate Nursery planted seeds from several species in 1853. Within three
years the nurseryman was offering eucalyptus seedlings for sale. About the same time, a clipper
ship captain, Robert H. Waterman, brought seed from Australia and grew trees on his ranch in
the Suisun Valley, northeast of San Francisco.

By the 1870s, a eucalyptus boom was in full swing throughout the state. The Australian native
was planted on thousands of acres. "For a person who has some capital and is willing to wait for
returns, there is a pretty chance to make a fortune in the growing of gum trees," suggested one
California newspaper.

The eucalyptus seemed to offer several paths to fortune. Shipbuilders, who first saw the wood as
it was used in Australian ships, were eager to try the timber believed to "surpass oak and teak in
strength." Regretfully, they discovered that the California blue gums split and curled, unlike the
old growth trees used by Australian shipbuilders.

San Diego joined the eucalyptus boom in the 1880s, mostly as a fuel crop. "Ranchers in the
Poway valley have begun to plant eucalyptus trees on the bare spots on the hillside," reported the
Union in February 1881, "not only as a source for fuel but to improve the looks of the region."
In May the newspaper reported: "The eucalyptus groves planted in the Cajon valley by Mr. Knox
and Clark are doing very well; the trees grow rapidly in this climate and show great promise as
shade trees and sources of wood."

In the mid-1880s, as the railroad crept south from Los Angeles, developers Frank and Warren
Kimball planted thousands of blue gums near the Sweetwater River, along the right of way for
the coming California Southern Railroad. The Kimballs used their eucalyptus to fire kilns
making brick for new railroad shops in National City.

If eucalyptus disappointed as a source for shipbuilders or fuel, the experts were happy to suggest
additional uses. As extensive tree-planting on San Diego city sidewalks began in the late 1880s,
eucalyptus promoters cautioned that "shade and moisture [would] cause malaria." However, "it
is well known . . . that the blue gum tree (eucalyptus globulus) instead of creating malaria
actually destroys it."

The medicinal value of eucalyptus became a popular theme. As early as 1872, the California Pharmaceutical Society predicted products from the tree would "ultimately supersede expensive drugs now is use." Eucalyptus oil extracted from the leaves was touted as an antiseptic and antispasmodic, and could be used as an expectorant, stimulant, and deodorant. It could treat not only malaria but insomnia, fevers, bladder infections, dysentery, diphtheria, tuberculosis, and venereal disease.

But in San Diego the greatest claim to fame for eucalyptus was its large-scale production for railroad ties. Despite the lesson learned from disappointed San Francisco shipbuilders, eucalyptus was still thought to be valuable as construction-grade timber.

In August 1906, the Santa Fe Land Improvement Company, a subsidiary of the Santa Fe Railway, bought the 9,000 acre San Dieguito Ranch in northern San Diego County. "The question of lumber for ties is one that is being given a great deal of attention," a company spokesman explained. "Experiments have shown that the eucalyptus tree makes first-class ties . . . The work of planting these trees will be commenced without delay."

The company took delivery of six million eucalyptus seeds shipped from Australia. In a three-room adobe at the former homestead of Don Juan María Osuna—San Diego's first mayor--a team successfully propagated three million seedlings. The young trees were set out among the hillsides of the old rancho, now named Rancho Santa Fe.

The eucalyptus railroad tie experiment ended in failure. The soft wood split from the rail spikes and tended to throw the tracks. Santa Fe recouped its investment by subdividing the ranch into hundreds of parcels for country estates. The region soon attracted Hollywood celebrities such as Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford. Bing Crosby would live for a time at the old Osuna rancho, which he bought in 1932.

In recent years, California's historic enthusiasm for eucalyptus has cooled. A world-wide study of the tree sponsored by the United Nations in 1955 concluded that in California, eucalyptus had become useful only as windbreaks in citrus groves. Ecologists have been less kindly, calling the tree an invasive pest that kills native vegetation and threatens biodiversity. A tree with an important role in California history may eventually be remembered as "the Australian weed" with a dark side.

Non-native eucalyptus trees line the road at the intersection of Via del Alba and Los Arboles in Rancho Santa Fe, 1923. *Library of Congress*.