

Hibbertia dentata: riches on the forest floor by Jennifer Liney



Like golden sovereigns hidden in the leaf litter on the forest floor and up the base of eucalyptus trunks, are the springtime flowers of *Hibbertia dentata*, a non-aggressive climber of the Dilleniaceae family, and cousin to the more flamboyant climber *Hibbertia scandens*. J. H. Maiden, one time Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens Sydney, in 1889 wrote that “so often does it display its beauty in our hedges that the appellation of ‘hedge pride’ might

suit it.” However, nowadays we opt for a more descriptive common name, namely Twining Guinea flower, or Trailing Guinea Flower, or Tooth Leaved Guinea Flower

H. dentata was first described by a Swiss botanist, Augustin Pyramus de Candolle, born in 1788, who established scientific criteria for determining natural relationships among plant genera. He contended that plant anatomy (i.e. the number of reproductive organs and their positions relative to each other) must be the sole basis for classification, for which he coined the term ‘taxonomy’, a term still widely used. De Candolle was also the first to put forward the idea of ‘Nature’s war’, meaning different species ‘fighting’ each other for space and nutrients. Today, we call this process species competition. The idea was taken up by Charles Darwin, who considered that the pressures produced by this ‘war’ contributed to ‘natural selection’.

During his professional life, de Candolle published many papers, as well as contributing to botanical books. He prepared the first seven volumes (of a total of 17) containing a descriptive classification of all known seed plants that was finally completed in 1873, long after he died in 1841.

His description of *H. dentata* was published in 1817, noting that the Type specimen (i.e. the first one collected) is ‘habituated in New Holland, on the coast of the East, near blue mountains and the sea’. (I could only find this phrase in Latin, so had to ask Mr Google for help in translation; this is what we came up with.)

Which takes us back to *Hibbertia dentata* and its golden flowers. A common species of open forest, even persisting in degraded situations, it has been called a light climber, twining around the stems of nearby herbs, and, if they are within reach, a little way up the trunks of saplings and small trees. The twining stems are reddish, and the alternate oval or oblong leaves with toothed margins are purplish when young, often retaining reddish or bronze tinges throughout their life. The bright yellow flowers are about 30mm across, with a central cluster of stamens. Each flower lasts only about a day, but the flowers appear continually over a long period.

The genus is named after George Hibbert, an 18th and 19th century English merchant and nurseryman and collector of rare and exotic plants, with an enthusiasm for the

family Proteaceae, called at the time Proteae; *dentata*, of course refers to the toothed leaves. As far as I could ascertain, this species has not had any major name changes during its botanical life.