



The Cabbage Tree Palm Series

Fabric designed by Cecille Weldon



The cabbage tree palm (*Livistona australis*) is a protected Australian native – this tall, slender evergreen grows to about 25 metres tall and can be found in clusters along the New South Wales east coast. In summer this giant palm produces striking spikes of cream flowers.

This native palm was important to many Aboriginal tribal groups.

The Dharawal people from southern Botany Bay are named after the cabbage tree palm.¹ The tree has a deep spiritual significance to Dharawal culture as they believe a big cabbage tree palm bends over to become a bridge to pass from this life to the other side.²

The Darug and Gadigal people twisted strips of bark to make fishing lines and weave baskets. Palm fronds were used to patch leaks in canoes and create shelters.³

Left: section of painting Cabbage Trees near the Shoalhaven River, N.S.W., 1860 / Eugene von Guerard | ML 1398. Mitchell Library, State Library NSW



Image courtesy Missouri Botanical Garden from Curtis's *Botanical Magazine*, Vol 103 no 6274 (1877)

April
1770

off Botany Bay

243.

As we could not all hope of their intending to come off to us we thought with which we were best-placed ourselves to see something of them however we rode at the Yawl a boat just capable of carrying the Capt. & Blonard myself & 4 more was accordingly prepared they set on their racks expecting us but when we came within about a quarter of a mile they ran away hastily into the country they appeared to us as well as we could judge at that distance exceedingly black as the place was low small canoes which they left behind the surf was too great to permit us with a single boat & that so small to attempt to land so we were obliged to content ourselves with gazing from the boat at the productions of nature which we so much wished to enjoy a nearer acquaintance with the trees were not very large & stood separate from each other without the least underwood; among them we could discern many cabbage trees but nothing else which we could call by any name in the course of the night many fires were seen
The land thus more appeared Cliffs & barren without woods on opening appearing like a barrow was seen we stood directly in line of

The cabbage tree palm is mentioned in many of the journals and letters in the first years of the colony.

From the journal of Joseph Banks, 27 April 1770: *"The trees were not very large and stood separate from each other without the least underwood; among them we could discern many cabbage trees but nothing else which we could call by name."*⁴

During colonial occupation, the first settlers made thatches for their houses⁵ from the trunk of the cabbage tree palm.

They also wove hats with the fibrous palm fronds. These square-topped woven hats became distinctive attire in both the colony and beyond.⁶ They were light and suited to the climate – the cabbage tree fibre would soften in summer to let air in and thicken when wet to become waterproof in winter.

In a photograph of the bushranger Ben Hall⁷ his cabbage tree hat can be seen beside him, and there was a gang



of hoodlums in early Sydney's history called the "Cabbage Tree Hat Mob"⁸ after these hats.

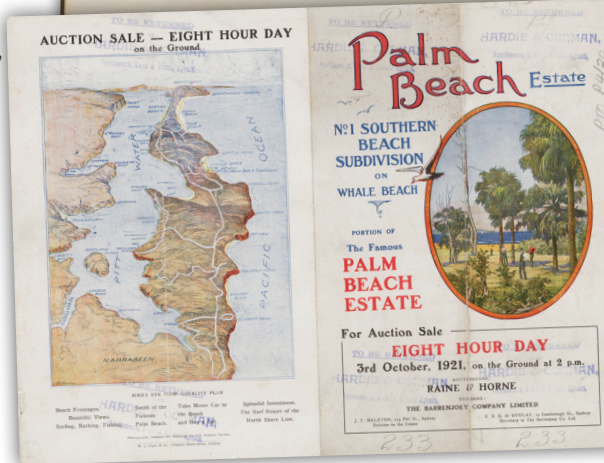
The land now known as Palm Beach on Sydney's Northern Beaches was said to be named after the cabbage tree palms which flower between December and February. The central fruit of the palm is edible but the tree perishes once it is removed.

These lush slender palms appear in artists' sketches and paintings in the early 20th century.

In 1912 a land sale brochure for the Palm Beach Estate states that "*the cabbage tree palms are ... one of its greatest features ... and will be strictly preserved by the vendors as reserves for all time*".⁹ Clusters of palms are still found in this part of the beach in the gullies of Horderns Reserve.

Top right: Martens, Rebecca. Sketchbook, Ca. by Rebecca Martens and Conrad Martens, 1851.

Bottom right: Brochure Palm Beach Estate - No. 1 Southern Beach Subdivision on Whale Beach 1921 courtesy State Library of NSW IE9047694



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Endnotes

1. Confirmed in conversation with Dr Shayne Williams, a senior Dharawal Leader, 15.6.21 referenced with his permission.
2. Transcript: Newton Fowell - letter to his family, 12 July, 1788, page 21 https://www2.sl.nsw.gov.au/archive/discover_collections/history_nation/terra_australis/letters/fowell/index.html viewed 12th June *"Subsistence depends, they are always fishing their lines are made of part of the Cabbage Tree and their hooks of some shell and I believe in the Summer they catch a great Number"*
3. Recorded for Eight Days in Kamay project, State Library of NSW, 2020. Reproduced with permission of Dr Shayne Williams. <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/whats-on/exhibitions/eight-days-kamay/exhibition-audio-transcripts/cabbage-palm-banksia-cob-audio-transcript> viewed 11th June
4. Journal of Joseph Banks, 27 April 1770, page 243 <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/joseph-banks-endeavour-journal>, viewed 20th June
5. George Bouchier Worgan - letter written to his brother Richard Worgan, 12 - 18 June 1788. <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/collection-items/george-bouchier-worgan-letter-written-his-brother-richard-worgan-12-18-june-1788>, viewed June 13th *"Cabbage-Trees abound here, it is a beautiful Tree, growing perfectly Straight to the Height of 70, 80 or 90 Feet. The Cabbage is at the top, enclosed in a Fibrous Network, and about this, large Fan-like leaves spring out. The Cabbage eats something like a Nut. the Wood of these Trees ... is very soft,) is of great Use to Us, for; cut into proper lengths and split in half, they serve for walling the Huts"*, also found in Margaret Blackburn letters received from her brother David Blackburn, 12 Mar. 1787-17 Mar. 1791, <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/collection-items/margaret-blackburn-letters-14-received-her-brother-david-blackburn> viewed 14th June Entry 15th November *"The valleys abound with cabbage trees with which most of the houses are built for the present and several stone buildings are begun."*
6. Dalby Herald and Western Queensland Advertiser (Qld: 1866 - 1879), Saturday 8 February 1868, page 4.
7. Ben Hall 1837-1865, Threads of Connection, Through a Glass Darkly, <http://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/threads-of-connection/through-glass-darkly#data6860>, accessed 13 January 2021
8. The Cabbage Tree Hat Gang nla.obj-754227387 National Library of Australia Old and New Sydney / by Edward Hordern and Sons Created/Published Sydney: Edward Hordern and Sons, 1882
9. <https://plantnet.rbgsyd.nsw.gov.au> search Livistona Australis

Image right: Section of brochure Barrenjoey - Palm Beach Estate - Pittwater - No boundaries shown, 1912 courtesy State Library of NSW IE9052087 <https://digital.sl.nsw.gov.au/delivery/action/collectionViewer>. **All Photos:** Cecille Weldon

