



Society for Growing Australian Plants

Cairns Branch Inc.

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SGAP Cairns visits the Sankowskys

Don Lawie



Just as Cairns bills itself as “a city in a garden”, so Garry and Nada Sankowsky could claim to have built “a garden in a wilderness”. We visited, by invitation, this botanical gem on Sunday 7 August 2022 and spent an afternoon of enchantment as Garry took a group around the rainforest and Nada's group were treated to a fern exposition. After a break we switched teams so as to get the

full experience.

I wrote a report on the day that evening but found myself “floundering in an unwieldy mass of superlatives”. And then my computer took pity on me and consigned nine hundred words to cyberspace.

So tonight I will not deal so much with specifics as with impressions, the first of which is that the soaring rainforest trees and the myriad of understorey plants has been here forever. Not so : it has taken only about forty years to build what appears to be a permanent ecosystem with the needs of individual plants balanced against the requirements of the mass in a coherent and happy environment.

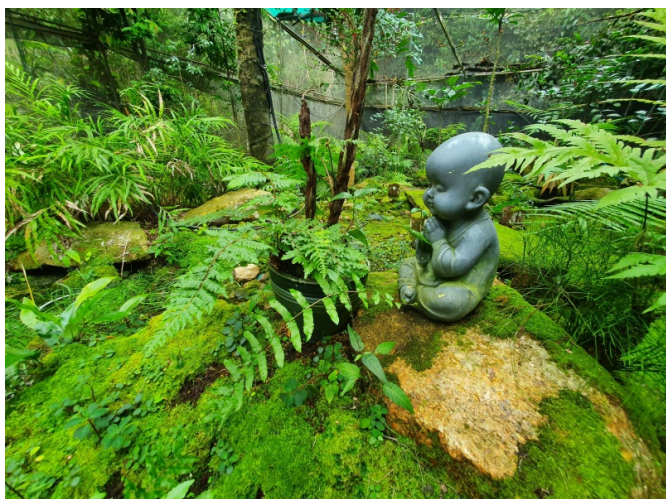
Back in the 1920's, Dave Gordon took a cactus-choked property and planted it with dry country plants he sourced from all over Australia. The result was named Myall Park and his experiment resulted in such garden favourites as *Grevillea* 'Robyn Gordon', *Grevillea* 'Sandra Gordon' and *Grevillea* 'Merinda Gordon'.

Garry and Nada travelled extensively through Cape York Peninsula, collecting plant material from widely differing habitats and making them thrive in their garden. As just one example, the notoriously difficult-to-grow red-flowering Penda, *Xanthostemon youngii* occurs on sandy wet ground, but grows beautifully at Tolga. Its relative, the Red Penda, *Xanthostemon whitei* is a upland rainforest tree which can attain stupendous size, as can the Golden Penda (which timbermen call Black Penda) *Xanthostemon chrysanthus* which prefers to grow beside a watercourse with its

buttress roots in the water. Another Penda is *Xanthostemon verticillatus* is a large shrub in comparison to its cousins. All of the above grow close together in the Sankowsky garden; what hybrids will result?

pathway is composed of moss.

I suspect that I am about to again flounder in an unwieldy mass of superlatives so instead I will reveal that I am not the only admirer of this determined duo. Science has awarded them the



To walk in Nada's ferneries is to experience the world before flowering plants were invented. Ancient, giant ferns *Angiopteris evecta* and *Ptisana salicina* with fronds five metres long tower above masses of Maidenhair Fern and the

ultimate accolade of naming a genus, *Sankowskya* and two species *Uvaria sankowskyi* and *Hibiscus sankowskiorum* in their honour. [Editor: Don't forget *Gossia sankowskyorum*.]

Many of their plants are grown specifically as butterfly hosts. The few exotics are there because they flower year round to provide nectar for the many species of butterfly in this garden. Garry, an authority on butterflies has written several books on the subject. His latest, "Field Guide to the Butterflies of Australia" comprises 400 pages of text and photos (he is also a photographic expert) of not just the mature insect but its larval and pupal stages and their host plants.

Sated with reams of knowledge, giddy with the effort of remembering it, we gathered for afternoon smoko. I have hardly brushed by the palette of plants we met but I hope my impressions give an indication of what lies in store for anyone fortunate enough to be invited to this garden.

How did it start? And some plant stories.

Stuart Worboys



Sankowsky's front verandah on a rainy day in 1984, right at the very beginning of the creation of their garden.

After a long, comfortable and friendly morning tea on their well-shaded patio, Garry launched into the tale of their garden's creation.

Starting with an almost bare block in 1983, the deep, well drained basalt soils were ripped and ploughed. Over the years, tonnes and tonnes of cheap, locally sourced peanut shell mulch was added, providing much-needed organic matter, and creating the fertile substrate for the magnificent gardens we see today.

Every plant in the garden had an interesting background story, and Garry remembered them all:

- *Dissilaria surculosa*, now a widely planted screening plant, is known only from Cape Melville, and a limited near-coastal area between Coen and Lockhart River
- *Rhodamnia longisepala* is not affected by myrtle rust, even though its nearby myrtle relatives were
- *Drypetes deplanchei* from the Clohesy River is food plant for a butterfly called the Grey Albatross, but the *Drypetes deplanchei* from other localities is not. Do the butterflies know something we don't? Is the Clohesy River population a separate species.
- *Cynometra ramiflora* grows as a mangrove on northern Cape York
- *Backhousia enata* - there are only 6 plants in the wild, and the species is badly affected by myrtle rust.

Nada's ferns

Nada's fern houses are an absolute delight. They house a rich variety of ferns delicate and robust. The following list is just a fraction of the species we saw on the day.



Nada watches suspiciously as Rob tries to pocket a rare pteridophyte.

ADIANTACEAE

Adiantum diaphanum

ASPLENIACEAE

Asplenium athertonense

Asplenium australasicum

Asplenium tnerum

BLECHNACEAE

Blechnum patersonii

CYATHEACEAE

Cyathea cooperi

Cyathea rebecca

DRYOPTERIDACEAE

Bolbitis quoyana

Lastreopsis grayi

Lastreopsis poecilophlebia

Oenotrichia tripinnata

LYGODIACEAE

Lygodium flexuosum

POLYPODIACEAE

Colysis ampla

Platynerium hillii

Pyrrosia confluens

THELYPTERIDACEAE

Christella subpubescens

July Excursion - Cairns SGAP steps back to 1875

Don Lawie



Seventeenth of July 2022: It may just as well have been before the beginning of Cairns as we trekked around the Centenary Lakes section of Cairns Botanic Gardens. We walked in comfort along the walkway just above the dark swirling water with primeval swamp plants above, below and beside us. Vague rustling noises, pops and clicks were all that broke the silence of the swamp. Trees grew into contorted shapes especially *Hibiscus tiliaceus*, Cottonwood, which has a habit of leaning over then producing vertical off shoots from the trunk. These then become props for the dense Climbing Swamp Fern *Stenochlaena palustris* which can reach up to three metres in height, its long, attractively coloured fronds covering up the host tree. *Pandanus* trees especially Swamp *Pandanus*

Pandanus solmslaubachii grew in untidy clumps to 20 metres in height with their four metre long fronds trailing in the dark water. A plant easily mistaken for *Pandanus* is *Scirpodendron ghaeri*, a giant sedge which also has sharply serrated edges, but differently placed to *Pandanus*. A large bright green *Scirpodendron* close to the boardwalk allowed us to inspect the serrations and contemplate using the leaves for string or cloth.



Scirpodendron (left), *Pandanus* (right)

When the city of Cairns was founded, much of the new settlement was reclaimed from just such a swamp as this one, interspersed by sand ridges. Present day clues to this are street names e.g. Lake Street, which was once a waterway.

But let us leave the swamp and go back to the beginning... We met for lunch in the commodious (and clean) shelter shed beside Saltwater Creek. President Patsy welcomed new member Lois Hayes and commiserated with Jeni B who is on the sick list – we all wish her well. Patsy then conducted a far-reaching business session at which we discussed some changes to our Cairns Branch constitution e.g. is the correct term Chair/man/person rather than President, and more importantly, should we align with most of

the State and call ourselves Cairns Branch Native Plants Queensland? Such changes are not made lightly and a conclusion must be made along the set lines of protocol.



Dodonaea polyandra, a species collected by Banks and Solander.

Setting off on our walk, the Lake area has a frontage to Greenslopes Street and this is the site of the best stand of Swamp Palms that I have ever seen. Strong angular trunks sit in permanent water and on our visit they were both flowering and fruiting. Native to the Jardine River area of Cape York Peninsula, *Nypa fruticans* would enhance a landscaping project that included a large water feature. *Nypa* palms bring to my mind the endless swamps of New Guinea. Another New Guinea plant was seen growing just past the Nypas: *Gymnostoma papuanum*. it is a close relative to the Daintree Pine, a plant of ancient heritage showed off its bright green leaves to advantage against the background of flowering Lotus Plants *Nelumbo nucifera*. The Lotus became a staple food of Ludwig Leichhardt during his 1856 journey to northern Australia.

Once out of the swamp we moved along the bank, then crossed, Saltwater Creek and came to the Banks and Solander Garden. This was established under the auspices of our branch to feature a

collection of the plants discovered in the Cape York area during Captain Cook's 1770 trip along the east coast of Australia. Cook called at Cape Grafton in a search for water and landed twice. The exact sites have not yet been determined and they are a long-term project for Cairns SGAP. Messrs Banks and Solander, Cook's botanists, were assiduous plant collectors and in the short stay at Cape Grafton they amassed a good lot of plants.

Here, our Branch Guru Doctor Bob, who had been passing fascinating information during the walk, became quite verbose. Bob's knowledge of Captain Cook's expedition and the plants found, is encyclopaedic. As we walked along he named each B & S plant, where it was collected and some info about the plant itself. We are indeed privileged to have such a source of knowledge among us.

Back to the shelter shed for coffee and tea and discussion of what we had just experienced.



Barbara Collins has *Nepenthes rowanae* in cultivation. She shows here the unusual and beautiful fruits of this native carnivorous plant. It is quite rigid and would make a great dried floral piece.

What's Happening?

Cairns

21 August 2022. Smithfield Conservation Park. Meet midday at the Moka Bar cafe. Drive into James Cook University and park in the free car park near the Australian Tropical Herbarium Building. Explore the tracks of the Smithfield Conservation Park (see rough map below). A surprisingly diverse park, containing eucalypt woodlands, fern gullies and complex mesophyll vine forest. The park is popular with mountain bikers, so keep an eye out!

Toilets will not be accessible.

18 September 2022. Russell Heads. All members are welcome. Some members may wish to participate in more energetic activities, others may wish to relax by the beach. BYO Chair!

The boat will depart from the wharf at 9.30, and return around 16.30. The wharf is located at the eastern end of Russell River Road, which turns off the Bruce Highway at Bellenden Ker, just south of Harvey Creek.

16 October 2022. Babinda Rainforest Farmstay, Kruckow Road, East Russell.

20 November 2022. Davies Creek - start of the Kahlpahlmin Rock Track

Townsville

NPQ Townsville normally meets at 7 p.m. on the second Wednesday of the month, February to November. The meeting venue is the Oonoonba Community Hall, Shannon Street, Oonoonba.

Tablelands

SGAP Tablelands Branch holds its meetings on the fourth Wednesday of the month at the C.W.A. Hall, Tolga, commencing 7.30. Excursions occur on the following Sunday. Contact: Peter Radke pandaradke@gmail.com

26 - 28 August 2022. Excursion to Cape Tribulation to see its rare endemic species and visit a successful revegetation site. See the attached flyer for more details. You must register with Peter Radke before the weekend.

**SGAP Cairns Branch
2022-2023 Committee**

President: Patsy Penny

Vice President: Dr Rob Jago

Secretary: Helen Lawie (secretary@sgapcairns.org.au, cairns@npq.org.au)

Treasurer: Val Carnie

Webmaster: Tony Roberts

Newsletter Editor: Stuart Worboys (worboys1968@yahoo.com.au)

