



*Society for Growing Australian Plants
Cairns Branch*

NEWSLETTER

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*Excursion Friday, Saturday, Sunday, 14, 15, 16 July, 2023.
Cooktown Botanic Gardens*

This month's excursion is a return to the Cooktown Botanic Gardens after last year's arrangements were cancelled as the Curator, Peter Symes, contracted covid. It has been necessary to confirm all arrangements early due to Peter having leave the previous week, and having to conform to all current legalities. Therefore only seven members of Cairns Branch have confirmed attendance and none of our usual confreres from Tablelands Branch sadly. Our Branch secretary will keep us up to the minute with developments.

CEMETERY 2023

Helen Lawie

Our walk for June was through Cairns Central Swamp located between McNamara and Little Streets. Possibly too sandy or wet to build on, it shapes an elbow between the sporting fields of Endeavor Park and Centenary Lakes on the other side of Greenslopes Street. Some urban green spaces inspire in their contrasts: a jabiru spotted in Saltwater Creek amidst the Saturday morning soccer scramble; or the serenity of the botanic gardens within arms reach of a busy café precinct.

The Central Swamp, however, is not an urban oasis. It is a dumping ground of domestic and construction rubbish, old furniture and empty liquor bottles, and a refuge for the homeless. We saw a cat grave, complete with faded photo memorial, hypodermic needles poked into a tree trunk, and a very polite but noisy motorbike rider who shared the trail with us.

The vegetation is a mixture of old originals (stands of tea trees give a nod to an historical coastline) shrubby regrowth and garden plants. Notable epiphytes included several ant plants *Myrmecodia beccarii* which have defied collection and trails of *Dischidia numelera*, "button orchid", which hang attractively in the bright Winter sunlight. We appreciated the rough feel of leaves of a Sandpaper Fig, *Ficus opposita*. We breathed in the strangely familiar scent of Fart bush *Breynia stipitata*, and admired the cutely packaged flower-fruit of *Claredendron floribundum*.





We spotted *Geodorum densiflorum* heavy with seed pods preparing to lay down their burdens at the length of their stalk, ready for the next stage of their life.

We also noted some native trees that had been planted and marked out with posts at some point. They were in varying stages of thrive or survive in what appeared to be the 'forget' stage of a 'set and forget' planting programme. The strongest impression was made by weeds and vines. The wet season has clearly favoured growth in these categories in the Cairns area, as most residents would agree. Our hot, wet climate benefits natives and exotics alike, and our walk was an A-Z of weeds and garden escapees.

Rattlepod *Crotalaria spectabilis*: cheerful yellow flowers become long lasting seeds that school children enjoy noisily shaking. Native to India and Asia, this plant may have been introduced as a nitrogen fixer. It is toxic to livestock.

Sensitive weed (the hint is in the name!): Giant sensitive plant, *Mimosa diplotricha*, a Category 3 restricted invasive plant (Department Agriculture and Fisheries DAF) not to be confused with the virtually identical *Mimosa pudica* popularly sold as in interactive curiosity. As kids we called it 'tickley-prickley', all soft pink pom-pom flowers until sharp thorns are revealed as leaves fold in response to touch. To learn it is an exotic pest is a shock. It has been part of the landscape for as long as I remember. Just like guinea grass, lantana, and wild raspberries (weeds imported from Africa, Central and South America, Southeast Asia, respectively).

Sensitive weed is native to Brazil. It now is considered naturalised from Ingham to Cooktown and control measures are in place to

restrain further spread. In addition to being an extremely strongly rooted plant, the DAF website also notes that seeds can lie dormant for up to 50 years. No wonder they recommend herbicide, mechanical, fire and biological control methods. (Re: biological control - An introduced sap feeding psyllid and an indigenous stem spot fungus are interesting extra reading.)

Mother in law's tongue, *Sansevieria trifasciata*: this hardy, curiously named, weed is currently trending as a low maintenance house plant. YouTube tutorials show how it can easily be propagated by the novice as each leaf segment can grow into a brand-new plant! Thoughtlessly dumped garden waste with these same regenerative powers could well have been the origin of *Sansevieria* growing along our walk. Native to Madagascar and South Asia it was flowering on this day, which was interesting to observe

Butterfly pea, *Centrosema molle*: native to Central and South America, naturalised in North Queensland and Northern Territory. Another member of the Fabaceae family introduced as a pasture legume now considered an environmental pest.

Scarlet morning glory, *Ipomoea hederifolia*: native to USA, Central and South America. So fast growing it looks like a time release documentary; it has an attractive red flower. If allowed to set seed EVERY SINGLE SEED WILL SPROUT for years! (Reference: sadly my own garden.)

Thunbergia grandiflora: Category 3 invasive plant (DAF). Native to India and Africa it is quite at home along our coastline from Tully to the Daintree with local infestations worse along the Mulgrave, Johnstone, and lower Mossman Rivers (daf.qld.gov.au). *Thunbergia* blankets low and mid story growth. Once it reaches the canopy it can pull down mature trees and block sunlight completely. Its modus operandi? Out compete. Method of choice? Smothering. Notoriously hard to kill, any portion of *Thunbergia* tuber can shoot and grow, as well as its stem fragments and seeds. The root/tuber system is extensive and mechanical removal is laborious and not recommended on creek banks

vulnerable to soil erosion. If allowed to run rampant, however, it can cause damage to concrete foundations, some tubers reaching a gigantic 70kgs.

Shoe button ardisia *Ardisia elliptica*: A glossy leaved shrub with stylishly contrasting pink and black berries, it is native to India and Southeast Asia (weeds.dpi.nsw.gov.au). Naturalised in parts of Queensland (especially Cairns) and the NT, and more recently in NSW, it outpaces and outcompetes natives to create a dominant shade tolerant monoculture.



We saw it in every stage of growth from seedling to mature shrub. Its berries were extravagantly abundant, easily overshadowing a Bandicoot berry, *Lea indica*, fruiting alongside which otherwise would have appeared generously endowed. *Ardisia* reproduces via seed alone, but with this much fruit on offer it needs no other method.

Urena burr, *Urena lobata*:



is also known as Congo jute. Native to tropical Asia and possibly also Australia

(lucidcentral.org) it is a declared environmental weed in Queensland and grows all around the world. In Cuba, Fiji and USA it is classified as a controlled noxious weed and therefore prohibited. Whereas in Brazil it is still planted for rope production and in Africa the seeds are used as a cereal in times of famine. Whether Urena burr is native or naturalised (possibly introduced via First Nations trade routes, or via Europeans around first contact) it is certainly widespread, growing across a range of environments and soil types from swamps to open woodlands (weeds.brisbane.qld.gov.au). Capable of forming dense thickets, it is a woody long lived plant with an annoying and very effective seed packet burr.

Singapore daisy *Sphagneticola trilobata*: listed among the top 100 global invasive species (along with *Ardisia*). The spread of Singapore daisy took place within my lifetime. Native to Central America and the Caribbean, any small section of the meters-long runners can put down roots. It grows incredibly fast. Sometime in the 80s it jumped over the garden fence, and we sadly have witnessed it engulf riverbanks ever since. Controlling this Category 3 restricted invasive plant is a passion project for Save Our Waterways Now and Kill Singapore Daisy groups.

Why do weeds make us so mad?



Native vines like *Vandasina retusa* and *Merremia peltate* also oppress mature trees, dragging them down in high winds, but they don't call us to battle like *Thunbergia*.

Aren't weeds just plants in the wrong place? Are roses just weeds with a marketing budget, as the saying goes? Why do we accept wait-a-while but dig wild raspberries out and burn them in a hole? It is not just the Aussie way of rooting for the outplayed local underdog.

Our island continent has a (mostly) transparent history of pre and post invasion plant species.

Our native plants are linked in uniquely Australian eco-web-cycles with insects and animals. When these cycles start to break down due to imported species, we rightly despair: exotic ants upsetting the balance between Golden ants, and the Apollo Jewel butterfly in ant plants; introduced Indian pasture grass burning hotter and higher onto limestone hill flora, and flora refuges at Undara; South American *Aristolochia*, Dutchmen's pipe vines, poisoning Cairns Birdwing caterpillars.

Recognising the presence of weeds in our environment indicates disturbed ground, degraded pasture and poor land management. Yet the weed filled cow paddocks of my youth continue to coexist beside rich rainforest. Divided by a fringe of edge lands where weeds vie with enthusiastic pioneer rainforest trees, they have achieved a kind of homeostasis. Many places are not so lucky. We can admire weeds, they are strong, fast and incredibly tenacious, but we should never grant them more than a begrudging toe hold on our unique island home.

Flowering this month on the Russell

Patsy Penny

I find these crazy seeds on the beach, but they grow best upstream in the high intertidal zone. This particular shrub is growing where we launch our boats, where it is often very fresh .

According to Norm Duke **cyno-metra** means *dogs uterus* in Greek and **iripa** means *within the stream bank* in Latin. It belongs to the family Caesalpiniaceae, distinguished by their legume fruits. Once again we have Beauty and the Beast ! A beautiful flower followed by a strange seed !



Cynometra iripa, Wrinkle Pod Mangrove



Next month we visit Josephine Falls to identify as many plants as possible to show off to the State Conference attendees in September.

I also hope to write a little about the 1986 conference which commenced the SGAP connection with Cooktown Botanic Gardens.