



*Society for Growing Australian Plants
Cairns Branch*

NEWSLETTER

Newsletter No 257

February, 2026

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Sunday, 15 February, 2026

*Limberlost Café,
Limberlost Nursery, Old Smithfield Road, Freshwater.
10 a.m.*

The venue for our February get together has been chosen with a view to the likely weather and after morning tea, if the weather gods allow it, we will then venture to nearby plant sites. During this meeting we will have the opportunity to map out at least some of the localities to investigate in 2026. This is not a “royal we”; if you are unable to attend please email secretary@sgapcairns.org.au with suggestions of places you would like to show off or ones you would like to know better. It is also a good idea to let the Secretary know if you are attending.



Our March meeting is our AGM where there is always much to discuss and decisions to be made.



From the Webmaster

I have added 23 historic newsletters to the website; they are scans of the original hard copies. If you have some old newsletters that that you would like added to the website, let me know.

dropped. It appears, from interpolation, that numbering was recommenced, from 01, around 1997. That would bring the current true issue number up to around 415.

One thing that I learned from the exercise was, that sometime after August 1996 (when issue 159 was published) and March 1997, the issue numbers were

This interesting fact was received in October, 2025, so the current newsletter would be 417.

MT STUART MYSTERY TREE REVISITED

Text and photographs by Stuart Worboys

Some of you may recall the Mt Stuart mystery tree. The story goes that, in 2010, two members of the Native Plants Queensland Townsville Branch were exploring the steep gullies that dissect the igneous rocks of Mt Stuart, the broad low peak that dominates the southern horizon of Townsville.

These rocky gullies, protected from fire, and well watered by wet season rains and dry season seepage, support narrow strips of vine thicket rainforest, just a few metres wide. You find in these creeks familiar small trees such as *Ficus rubiginosa*, *Lophostemon grandiflorus*, *Gossia bidwillii*, and *Drypetes deplanchei*.

But in this gully, just 500 m from the Mt Stuart Lookout and 3.4 km southeast of the old James Cook University Botany Department, the two NPQ Branch members found something that was distinctly unfamiliar. Their discovery was quickly dubbed the “mystery tree”. More details of its discovery are recounted on the Townsville NPQ website (<https://www.npqtownsville.org.au/mystery-tree-at-mt-stuart-april-2010/>)



The hikers took their find first to Betsy Jackes, then to the Australian Tropical Herbarium. The mystery tree ultimately proved to be a new species, and was placed in the genus *Backhousia*, in the Myrtaceae family. It was given the species epithet

tetraptera, recognising its peculiar four winged fruit.

Like its relatives, *Backhousia hughesii* (stonewood) and *Backhousia myrtifolia* (cinnamon myrtle), *B. tetraptera* has proved susceptible to myrtle rust. This, combined with its extremely restricted distribution on just one creek (although there is an unconfirmed report from Clemant State Forest), has led to its declaration as Critically Endangered by both the State and Commonwealth.

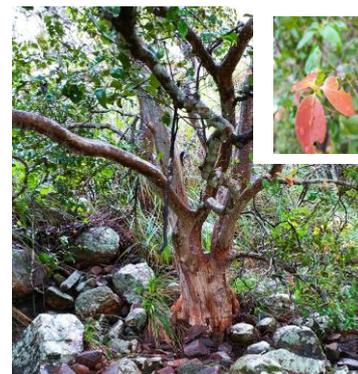
There is now a program to collect and propagate cuttings of the species. This is being carried out at James Cook University’s Townsville Campus,

where they have perfected the propagation techniques for this species.

Last week two of us paid a visit to Mt Stuart. Heavy rains had turned the normally dry gullies into a series of small pretty waterfalls. The landscape was green, and amongst the lush *Themeda triandra* grass were the flowers of *Murdannia graminea*, *Wedelia spilanthoides*, *Acmella grandiflora* and the incredibly beautiful ground orchid, *Habenaria triplonema*. The thick grass also hid an abundance of loose rocks, which made descending the steep hills somewhat treacherous.



The goal was to accurately map and take cuttings from several trees, an easy goal, albeit made slightly uncomfortable by the active gunfire at the adjoining Mt Stuart Army Training Area. The trees were not hard to find - for a short stretch of the gully they were the dominant tree. Their smooth trunks sit on the water’s edge, branching and spreading to form a low dark green canopy. New growth is reddish, sometimes twisted and stunted by myrtle rust infection. We saw only a few flowers, tiny and white, but several trees were heavy with pale pink fruit.



The bags of cuttings we collected are being propagated at JCU Townsville. Eventually, some will be planted on site, others will be distributed for growing at low myrtle rust risk sites. These simple actions, combined with sensible fire management on Mt Stuart, will hopefully ensure the survival of this species into the future.