

SGAP Cairns

Society for Growing Australian Plants Inc., Cairns Branch
Celebrating our 40th year

NEWSLETTER 200 MAY 2020

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To mark Cairns SGAP 40th year and the 200th newsletter, I'm devoting this month's edition to the history of gardening with native plants in Cairns. To tell the story, I'm presenting a selection of articles from newspapers and old newsletters.

Eugene Fitzalan establishes a nursery

John Dowe (2015) Cunninghamia, 15:87-133

Eugene Fitzalan came to Australia from Ireland about 1849 [and] moved to Cairns in 1886 [where he] became active in the initial development off the Cairns Municipal Botanical Reserve.

Fitzalan's contribution to horticulture was... significant. He was active in establishing a number of private gardens, as well as public gardens in Bowen and Cairns. The Cairns Botanical Gardens is now an internationally recognised heritage-listed facility featuring tropical plants.

He introduced a number of species into horticulture, such as *Atractocarpus fitzalanii*

[brown Gardenia], *Hymeneria fitzalanii* [common fuzz orchid] and *Cycas* species, which are today of significant importance in commercial and amenity horticulture.



Atractocarpus fitzalanii in fruit.

Dr Flecker advocates a Botanical Gardens for Cairns

Dr Hugo Flecker, an internationally renowned medical researcher, was also the founder of the North Queensland Naturalists' Club. In his 1935



SOCIETY FOR GROWING AUSTRALIAN PLANTS INC., CAIRNS BRANCH

Email: secretary@sgapcairns.org.au

Website: www.sgapcairns.org.au

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presidential address to the Club, he advocated for a Botanical Gardens in Cairns, which was reported in the Northern Herald of the time. The address is remarkably prescient.

The Northern Herald, 28 September 1935

...Your committee believes that [an appeal to the City Council] being made to establish botanical gardens would be of great value...

Tourists do not come to see shops... which they can see just as well in their own home district. They do come to see what they cannot see elsewhere... therefore, from a scientific, educational and commercial point of view [a garden] should be established.

That the powers that initiated the plans for Cairns took a long view of its future as a great city is evident by its provision of and extensive area within the city boundaries as a botanical reserve. Indeed a botanical garden was actually started on that particularly fertile site at Edge Hill, but alas, for some reason or other, it was abandoned! Many years have passed since and it appears no move has been made to re-establish such a scheme.

[Elsewhere in the city] a certain amount of decorative effort is shown in the planting of the garden plots in the streets and in several of the parks... A few of the original self-planted trees remain, notably the large *Ficus infectoria* [= *Ficus virens*] in Abbott Street, whilst along the Esplanade some of the original Australian Banyans, *Ficus thynneana* [= *Ficus microcarpa*] which appear to be found native only about the Cairns foreshore and a number of other handsome trees such as *Cryptocarya triplinervis*, *Barringtonia calyptata*

with its pendant flowers spikes, the curious *Eugenia cormiflora* [= *Syzygium cormiflorum*] with flowers and large fruit growing directly from the tree trunk, the Marking Nut tree *Semecarpus [australiensis]*, some wattles, *Acacia aulacocarpa* and *A. oraria* still persist. In Anzac Park some self-planted trees likewise have survived, notably the *Wormia alata* [= *Dillenia alata*] with its large golden yellow flowers, a large *Melaleuca*, also *Mallotus philippensis*, *Timonius rumphii* [= *Timonius timon*], etc...

In addition to these, numerous trees have been planted, some of the finest being the various native trees, notably the Tacahamac Tree, *Calophyllum*

inophyllum along the Esplanade, an Umbrella Tree, *Brassaia actinophyllum* [= *Schefflera actinophylla*], sadly lopped to allow room for the overhead high tension wires, some Queensland bean trees, *Castanospermum australe* and quite recently a number of privately donated Flame Currajongs, *Brachychiton acerifolius* have been added... [Despite] the fact that there are hundreds of fine indigenous plants in Noth Queensland, only about 25 are represented in the streets and parks around Cairns.

With the exception of Alexandra Palm (*Archontophoenix alexandrae*) none of the many native palms seem

to be cultivated...

It is amongst the smaller shrubs that the greatest weakness is shown, where fully 95 per cent consist of nothing else but crotons and *Acalyphas*. Moreover, the extension of new plots in different directions has not lessened this monotonous proportion, for there is barely a single plot in the whole city where these plants do not predominate... Of native ferns and orchids there is a great



Dr Hugo Flecker in 1932

abundance, and the latter at least are appreciated, although nowhere in the city are there any public display of some of our most majestic ferns with fronds well over 18 feet in length. A bush house reserved for these alone would attract immense interest and tourists would not likely forget these...

As it takes many years to make a truly fine botanical gardens, the sooner a start is made the better... it is believed that if a director of parks and gardens be appointed, who has special experience... is... possessed of sufficient enthusiasm... [and is] encouraged in this scheme by sufficient finance and the requisite skilled labour so that the plants shall be secured, arranged and properly and conspicuously labelled, it will not only be of enormous educational value... but will supply a satisfying desire of a large band of tourists which a heap of advertising would never do.

The Botanic Gardens emerges

Queensland Heritage Register, 2016

In 1934-35 a significant advance [towards the establishment of a formal botanical garden] was made with around 25 acres (10 hectares) of the reserve on the lower slopes of Mt Islay cleared of heavy undergrowth and planted with young trees. The mayor of Cairns advised that the reserve would be planted with "permanent trees which are noteworthy for their ornamentation and their regularity of design, planted at pre-determined distances, so that they will provide permanent avenues of great beauty."

...This project continued until 1940 when part of the recreation reserve was converted to a Quarry Reserve for war purposes and part of the 1930s gardens work was destroyed by quarrying. It appears that oil palms, poincianas, hoop pines, two rubber trees, a *Dillenia*, a *Schizolobium*, an Indian mango, a Wongai plum, a *Terminalia* and a Malay Apple were planted during this period by Les Wright...

Following Wright's death in 1947, Tom Mitchell was appointed to the curator's position. He held this position until his death in 1953. A red brick house was built for Mitchell in the early 1950s. This house today houses the Garden's information centre and administration offices. Mitchell died in

1953 and the position was taken up by Jim Gould until 1966.

In 1966 Cairns City Council appointed Vince Winkel as Curator of Parks, Gardens and Reserves, a position he held until 1984, and in March 1967 adopted a five-year plan to develop 8 acres (3.24 hectares) in the northwest of the Edge Hill reserve as a small botanical gardens. Collins Avenue and McCormack, Goodwin and McDonnell streets bordered the site. Winkel designed the new garden, laying out a figure-of-eight walkway. The site was cut diagonally by a small creek over which a bridge was erected, and the banks of the creek were planted with various trees including *Cassia*, *Bauhinias*, *Parkia*, *Caesalpinia*, *Tabebuia* and *Semecarpus australiensis*, known as the Tar tree.

Cairns SGAP is formed.

Mary Gandini (founding member)

History of the branch

This branch was formed in 1980 to create interest in the cultivation of our native species in preference to exotic species. Originally, monthly meetings were held at night with an excursion held on one Sunday each month, visiting interesting botanical areas as well as parks and private gardens.

Marion Haupt, Newsletter Number 1, May 1980

May meeting.

In the absence of President and Treasurer an informal meeting was held. It was well attended. A report on the Annual SGAP Conference was given and a discussion on the growing of *Callistemons* in this area took place. Plants were brought in by three members. Acacias, Black Palm, Melastoma, Burdekin Plum and a box of *Grevillea sessilis* were raffled. Many thanks to those members who brought them along. The plants were of high quality.

A field trip was arranged to visit the gardens of Melsonrock Nursery on Sunday, 9th May at 1 p.m. Thanks to Sandra Tenni for her hospitality.

Irvinebank field trip

On Sunday 4th May, a group of 6 vehicles proceeded from Herberton to Stannary Hills. Many

stops along the way revealed some beautiful specimens. Hovea, Trigger Plant, Eucalyptus shirleyi, [Corymbia] peltata, and [Eucalyptus] similis, Helichrysum bracteatum [= Xerochrysum bracteatum] and H. newcastlianum [Coronidium newcastlianum] were some. A few kilometres from Stannary Hills, *Grevillea pteridifolia*, *Callitris intratropica* and *Acacia wickhamii* were seen. We lunched at the site of the old Stannary Hills township. *Melaleuca linariifolia*, *Eucalyptus tereticornis* and a patch of naturalised Zinnias were growing at the dam wall. Further on, Kerry Davis led us to a patch of *Macropterathes montana*, a most unusual small tree with red or yellow tube shaped flowers and tiny leaves close to the branches. These trees looked old and gnarled.



Australia's only purple-flowered Acacia is a rare and iconic species restricted to the hills around Irvinebank.

Further towards Irvinebank were *Melaleuca minutifolia*, *Casuarina pinifolius* [possibly *Allocasuarina inophloia*], *Melaleuca viridiflora* (red and green), *Bursaria incana*, *Xanthorrhoea johnsonii*, *Hakea lorea*, *Grevillea parallela* and the purple wattle, *Acacia purpureopetala*. Our last stop, on the way back to Watsonville was magnificent with *Grevilleas pteridifolia* and *glossadenia* blazing with colour and *Grevilleas glauca* and *dryandri* with seed pods.



Grevillea glossadenia, another species restricted to the hills around Irvinebank.

There were many more species, all interesting and many restricted to this remarkable area. We were very fortunate to have Kerry Davis from Atherton Native Nursery along to identify many species for us. This is a trip that perhaps Cairns members could organize sometime as only two Cairns members were able to come.

The Orchid Study Group

Don and Pauline Lawie lead the Indigenous Orchid Study Group of the Australian Native Plants Society from 1995 to March 2011. Here is a discussion in their newsletter of the trials and tribulations of growing Queensland's floral emblem - the magnificent Cooktown Orchid.

Mary Gandini, ASGAP Indigenous Orchid Study Group, Newsletter 27, June 1999.

The Queensland Herbarium recognises one species only and treats the different morphologies as varieties.

Dendrobium bigibbum grows both epiphytically and lithophytically... Racemes bear up to 20 white to purple flowers... Their natural distribution indicates that these orchids are monsoonal in requirements, *i.e.*, they like a wet season followed by a dry period. All of the varieties will grow very well on trees in the garden in North Queensland.

This year the Cookies have been making a wonderful display on the trees in my garden for several weeks and this is the best they have been for years. Not one flower has been eaten by the ubiquitous caterpillar that usually makes a mess of the first flowers. I have not even seen the little white eggs. Why? Two suggestions come to mind. The first is that we have had huge quantities of rain and it started early this year. The second is that the fruit fly blocks that we all had in our gardens may have broken the moth's life cycle. Well, the blocks have been gone for some time and they were in place last year and so were the caterpillars. Spraying was not done because it was always raining, or "going to".

...Plants are easily propagated from an aerial growth or keiki (means baby in Hawaii). Keikis are produced from the apical nodes and are vegetative shoots with roots that can be easily detached when

sufficiently developed. Of course, the orchid experts... hybridise plants to produce superior flowers, and many new creations are grown from seed thus formed. In nature *Dendrobium bigibbum* crosses with *Dendrobium discolor* to produce plants intermediate between the parents.

Don Lawie

A note on the above - I think I know where Mary's bugs have gone: they've all come down to our place [at East Russell]! We didn't really get a dry season last year, and the Cookies are responding by simply not flowering here. The few that did try were swamped by various predators as usual, and we had just one spray of about five beautiful flowers. In contrast, in Babinda, only 12 km away, the Cookies, growing on garden palms, are presently flowering beautifully with up to twenty flowers per plant. The difference is that we are almost encircled by rainforest, and the town gardens are further away from this wonderful storehouse of voracious insects.

We concluded some years ago that Cookies are not suitable for our place, but their continued success in town encourages us to keep on trying. As Mary writes, spraying is very difficult in a climate of constant rainfall.

SGAP Cairns helps out at Cooktown Botanic Gardens

A core annual activity for north Queensland's SGAP Branches has been the annual working bee at Cooktown Botanic Gardens. In the following article, Don Lawie describes the activities undertaken in June 2007,

Don Lawie, SGAP Cairns Newsletter, July 2007

This was our sixth year in the Gardens, and at last our previous efforts are having an effect. Perhaps our biggest win was in fencing several of the garden areas and then concentrating on them. The Banks and Solander Garden needed only a bit of weeding and pruning this year, followed by a good mulching to bring it back to an acceptable appearance. The same applied to the rejuvenated SGAP Garden, and more plants were put in this year to increase understorey species variety. These

plants were provided by Yuruga Nursery at a vastly reduced price and paid for evenly by both Cairns and Tableland branches. Being Yuruga plants they were, of course, in A1 condition and of proper provenance for planting in Cooktown.

We had twelve starters this year, plus Diana and Dianne from the Gardens staff, so were able to achieve quite a lot. [Orchid experts] Len and Kate Lawler were *en route* to Europe, so Mary Gandini and Pauline Lawie filled in for Len, and assisted Dianne to "cook-up" a batch of seed from a Cooktown Orchid (*Dendrobium bigibbum*) and get them sown in jars. This was done at the Cooktown High School science lab per kind favour of the science teacher there, to take advantage of the closed atmosphere and scientific equipment available. We now await results...



Don and Dianne take a quick breather from mulching at Cooktown Botanic Gardens, June 2007.

Plants in the nursery area were in better condition than formerly, but Kay and Tablelands Pauline spent their time there profitably, weeding and sorting with technical help from Stuart and Diana, and the area again looks neat and cared for.

The physical area of Cooktown Botanic Gardens is very large, and much of it is still lost in the overgrowth that occurred early in the 20th century after the town and gardens declined. Staff are constantly clearing this growth and our team spent some time following up on the work by cutting back regrowth, in particular of *Albizia* plants. These were brought to the Gardens in the 1880's by the Tropical Plant Acclimatisation Society, along with many other species, to see whether they would be suitable for growth in the area. The *Albizia* thrived and spread and is now a major weed....

Jo Wynter, of Nature's Powerhouse, welcomed us again as old friends, and once again embarrassed

us with her effusive appreciation and and showered us with sumptuous morning and afternoon teas which made returning to work a real effort.

Sunday morning saw us almost running out of work, so Diana suggested that we concentrate on a rock pile between the nursery and cricket pitch. The team excelled themselves here, and by lunch time had weeded, moved rocks, planted a selection of appropriate plants selected by Stuart from nursery stock, watered and mulched the area to make it a new, attractive spot. I was pleased to put in a large specimen of the Golden Orchid, *Dendrobium discolor*, beside a rock and supported by a tree. The orchid is fully two metres high and has a number of keikis which I tied to the supporting small tree and they will grow onto it. The orchid will flower this year.

Botanical history

SGAP Cairns has long maintained an interest in the history of botanical exploration in North Queensland. In particular, in recent years, Dr Rob Jago has documented the collecting activities of Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander during Cook's 1770 exploration of Australia's east coast.

R.L Jago, SGAP Cairns Newsletter April 2011

Notes on plants collected at Cape Grafton in 1770 by Banks & Solander

... Joseph Banks and Dr. Daniel Solander collected some 30,382 botanical specimens during their 1051 day round the world voyage on the Endeavour between the 25th August 1768 and the 12th July 1771. A tiny handful, comprising some thirty-one species, including three type specimens are known to have been collected at Cape Grafton on the 9th June 1770. These collections along with notes and manuscripts by Banks, Solander and Sporing along with the drawings of Sydney Parkinson, Sporing and Buchan made during the voyage are held at the British Museum of Natural History.

The difficulties in getting the collected specimens, drawings and manuscripts back to England safe and sound in good condition can never be underestimated...

I have not to date been able to find a complete catalogue of the plants collected at Cape Grafton though only a small fraction of the vast amount of available literature has been examined. Some of the plant names used for a small number of

illustrations in Banks Florilegium appear to be incorrect...

At Cape Grafton

Early in the afternoon of the 9th June 1770 Cook anchored the Endeavour somewhere around the middle of what is now known as Mission Bay at a position approximately one kilometre to the northeast of Rocky Island. Cook, Banks and Solander immediately set out with a crew in one of the ships boats to search for a suitable watering place on the mainland. Somewhere between the eastern end of what is now known as Palm Beach and Cape Grafton they landed at least once and possibly twice to search for a suitable watering point. At one or possibly two of these locations Banks and Solander made their Cape Grafton collections. The time spent collecting plants must have been brief, perhaps no more than 15-20 minutes given the time necessary for the round trip of at least nine kilometres from the Mission Bay anchorage to Cape Grafton and back...

Three type specimens are known to have been collected by Banks and Solander at Cape Grafton 9th June 1770, [including] *Brunoniella acaulis* subsp. *acaulis*... a prostrate herb usually with a very short unbranched stem.

Links to the region

Stuart Worboys, SGAP Cairns Newsletter 154-155, October-November 2015

Barbecue at Babinda

September's SGAP outing was a long-planned gathering of north Queensland SGAP groups. Invitations were sent to all groups from Townsville north, and we were pleased to have visitors from the all over. For such a big meeting, we chose one of the richest and most biodiverse spots in north Queensland – the Babinda Boulders...

Rob Jago and myself lead two groups down to the lookout over the gorges and channels that have been the subject of so many tragic accidents. This is Rob's home territory, and he had a story for everything green. He pointed out a couple of rare, Wet Tropics endemics growing right next to the carpark – *Diploglottis pedleyi* and *Neostrearia fleckeri*. For the visitors from drought-stricken Townsville, this was a rare opportunity to view lowland rainforest at its best...

Whilst we were out botanising, Boyd [Lenne] and Coralie [Stuart] were busy at the barbecue, pulling together a fantastic feed of sausages, sauce, bread and salad. There was even some honey-soy marinated tofu for those not inclined to munch on a "mystery bag". After lunch, we took the opportunity to discuss the future of SGAP in the tropical north. Most groups find it difficult to attract new members, and questions were asked about what changes, if any, should be made. I'm not sure that answers were arrived at, but the discussion was both lively and frank. Thanks to everyone who contributed to making this day a success. I trust we can hold another joint meeting next year.

Looking to the future

Stuart Worboys and members of Cairns SGAP, SGAP Cairns Webpage, 2020

... In 2020, SGAP Cairns remains a friendly group whose meetings are as much opportunities for social outings in diverse natural settings as it is for scientific enlightenment. Members appreciate having a chat about the plants they're passing and also a bit of a laugh as we ramble along at SGAP pace - generally acknowledged as 800 m per hour. We have welcomed several new members in recent years who have brought a youthful enthusiasm and hope for the long-term survival of the group.

Upcoming events

Cairns Branch

As you are all aware, due to COVID-19 related restrictions on gatherings we are currently unable to hold our regular meetings and excursions. Now that these are starting to ease, we may be able to recommence meetings and excursions, provided numbers don't exceed ten. Perhaps on **Sunday 21 June** we could meet up again to restart the 2020 SGAP year?

Townsville

Meetings of Native Plants Queensland - Townsville Branch on the 2nd Wednesday of each month at 7pm, Annandale Community Centre. Excursions the following Sunday.

Townsville advise "As you are all aware, we are unable to hold our regular meetings and outings due to Covid-19 restrictions. Now that these are starting to ease, we are hopeful that we will be able to celebrate our 50th Anniversary together at the end of June. We are tentatively proposing to hold a celebration on **Sunday 28th June**. So, let us all hope that the situation continues to improve – a lot can happen in 8 weeks!

Of course, we hope to be back to normal as well as for our **10th June** meeting!"

Website: www.npqtownsville.org.au

Tablelands

Meetings on the 4th Wednesday of each month at 7:30 pm, Tolga CWA Hall. Excursions the following Sunday.

Excursion officers: Bert and Chris Jaminon, 40914565.



The beautiful cauliflorous flowers of Scented Daphne, Phaleria clerodendrum.