



*Society for Growing Australian Plants
Cairns Branch*

NEWSLETTER

Newsletter No 234

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*Excursion Sunday, 15 September, 2024.
Cassowary Forest Nature Refuge, 1965 Kennedy Highway,
Speewah.*

From Kuranda traffic lights coming towards Mareeba the turnoff is five (5) kms.

Go past Top Rock Quarry (on right), crest low rise, SLOW down. Turn SHARP left at end of low guard rail (between 2 tyres). Turn left onto the old highway after few metres. It is the only property on this road. "Nature Refuge" sign at entrance. If you reach Speewah turnoff, you've gone approximately 700 metres too far towards Mareeba.

Apart from the track to the house, this is uncleared bush and uneven ground in open eucalypt forest, adjoining steep rainforest. There is a deck to sit on in the treetops.

If you have any questions about the directions or the weather Ring Liz 0488 370 507

As usual we will meet at 12 noon for lunch



Our October excursion is Hartley Creek Walk – Look it up. Looks great.

In November we will go to the Tablelands where it should be cooler. Peter Radke is going to give us the talk he presented to last year's conference with real live plants instead of photographs

My grateful thanks to Stuart who managed to fit the last two newsletters into his very busy schedule.

GRASS TREES

Tony Roberts



***Xanthorrhoea semiplana* tufted grass tree**
(Peripitus)



Xanthorrhoea preissii
(Australian Seed Supplier Pty Ltd)

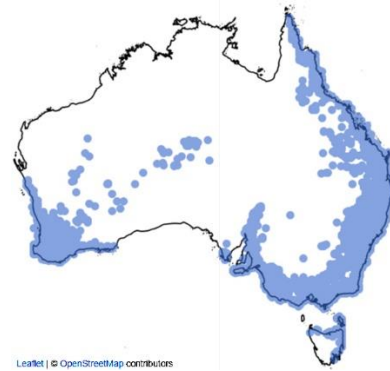
Grasstrees are a common sight locally, in well drained and sometimes very harsh locations. They have evolved to thrive in poor soils and in fire prone environments.

They are unmistakable, with a head of stiff, grass-like leaves and a trunk encased in old leaf bases, that are often blackened by fire. The inflorescence is a long spike of flowers, atop a long woody scape reaching 4m in height in some species.

Grasstrees are slow growers. Growth rate estimates range from eight to 60mm a year, depending on the species and the environmental conditions. As the plant grows, new leaves are produced above, while older leaves die and form a skirt around the trunk. If a fire occurs, the leaves of the plant burn to the leaf bases, which remain intact and protect the

stem from the heat. After a fire, the plants often quickly replace their leaves and flower, taking advantage of the nutrient rich ash.

There are about 30 grasstree species, all endemic to Australia. They are placed in the genus *Xanthorrhoea*, (G. xanthos = yellow: rhoea = to flow, in reference to the resin that flows from the stem).



Leaflet | © OpenStreetMap contributors

Distribution of the Genus *Xanthorrhoea*

(Atlas of Living Australia website

at <http://www.ala.org.au>. Accessed 7 September 2024)

Our locally common species is *Xanthorrhoea johnsonii*, or Johnson's grass tree. It occurs in eastern Australia from Cape York to about Sydney. Its trunk can reach a height of around five metres .



Xanthorrhoea johnsonii
(Mark Marathon)

Ethnobotanically, grasstrees have a wealth of uses.

In the growing tip of the trunk, an edible portion of starch can be found. Traditionally this was removed and eaten raw or cooked. Other edible products that were harvested for food was the underground portion of the trunk, leaf bases, flower nectar and resident grubs, usually retrieved from dead or dying plants. The flowering stalks were used for fire sticks and spear shafts.

The gum that the genus was named after was harvested for food and as a glue. Records show that the gum was used to treat chest complaints by John White, the Surgeon General in 1788. It has been used for numerous other purposes over the years as varnish, incense and as an additive to a certain brand of shoe polish.

An ingenious use of grass trees is as an indicator of the time since the last fire. The leaves of the plant are removed by fire. The length of the skirt of dead leaves is proportional to the time since the plant was last burned hence if the growth rate of the specimen is known (estimated from historic photos for example) a fairly accurate guess can be made.

BLACKDOWN TABLELAND NATIONAL PARK

Report and photographs Patsy Penny

Our family recently had the wonderful experience of camping in Blackdown National Park for a second time. Our previous visit was post fires so this time showed a vastly different landscape.

It is the traditional home of the Ghungalu people whose rock art can be seen in the Park.



This national park is in Central Queensland in the Sandstone belt. The road in from the Capricorn Highway rises steeply and narrowly to meet the border of the Park. Due to recent heavy rains the road was rutted and slow allowing me to enjoy the plants along the way: large stands of flowering

Grevillia, pockets of Xanthorrhoea johnsonii in flower, many flowering wattles and hundreds of other species in full flower.

Because of the elevation of the plateau, the climate is more temperate than the surrounding country and some species are found only in that location. We spent three glorious days in the Park taking advantage of the many walks through the gorges. A really striking aspect were the flowering Livistona australe.



Wherever we looked there were masses of white amongst the green in the steep valleys and ravines and the lorikeets were going crazy

Another very notable plant flowering was the Black Bootlace Orchid, *Erythrorchis cassythoides*. This leafless orchid relies on a symbiotic relationship with fungi and rises from the ground on long black stems. When they aren't in flower, they



are just straggly vines. We spied some King Orchids in flower up high on the rocks.

In places there were masses of Eleocharis shrubs with blue drupes.

There was some coral fern growing near a creek, along with *Drosera spatulate*.

We delighted in the many heavily flowering plants we encountered on our walks. I have included some images.



Cobbold Gorge – Bridge walk

Report and photographs Helen Lawie

It was late June and our little family saw fit to drive six hours West to finally visit Cobbold Gorge.

After one heck of a wet season the country was green and full of birds, cattle and roos. Late rain delayed the start of the tourist season this year, also causing a few problems for staff arrival. But a freshly graded gravel road welcomed us to Cobbold Gorge Village, the caravan and cabin campground that operates tours to the Gorge located on private property.

Our hike up to the glass bridge over the Gorge began at, and returned to, a large shelter shed. The info-boards on display describing the plants we might see were written by Major Les Hiddens, 'The Bush Tucker Man'. (For the curious: his series

first aired on the ABC back in 1988!) So, in addition to species names, the uses by First Nations Peoples were also included.

Those wanting to know more about these uses would enjoy a visit to Talaroo Hot Springs back on the Highway, where the Ewamin people share their knowledge and hospitality.

Once onto the sandstone and away from the creek the vegetation became immediately more sparse and stunted. Of note was a Cooktown Ironwood tree *Erythrophleum chlorostachys*, not big enough to build much from even though quite advanced in years. Famously poisonous to livestock, and toxic to burn, these trees were used by settlers as railway sleepers.

Our well informed Savanah Guide told stories of the gold rush and pastoral expansion via different plants. He used water to animate seed heads from black tip spear grass which twisted around ready to penetrate a host.

He had a jar of Gidgee gidgee, *Abrus precatorius*, seeds to show us what to avoid ingesting if we enjoyed life, though the vine growing in front of us looked innocuous.



One little tree was widespread. With little obovate leaves, little round green fruit, little trunks with little sucker cap marks, it

was perfectly proportional. Once the fruit ripen to yellow the Leichhardt breadfruit, *Gardenia vilhelmii*, can be eaten and real sustenance can be gained. There were none ready to sample, but we did try the Nonda plum, *Parinari nonda*. Certainly edible and abundant, it was promoted to us to stave off thirst. Incredibly sour, it somehow tricks the mouth into feeling full of moisture.

Two final plants were aromatically reminiscent of the medicine cabinet. Crushed leaves of the Native myrtle/Turkey bush, *Calytrix exstipulata*, smelt like Dettol. With its tiny leaves and small flowers it was growing and flourishing in harsh conditions in cracks between rocks.



Whereas the Licorice bush, *Prostanthera* sp. Gilbert River, needed more soil and water lower down on the slopes. Its leaves

smelt more like Vicks than licorice, but that is the trouble with common names. Much more could be said about the geology, wildlife and even the view of Cobbold Gorge from the helicopter. So I will finish by simply saying it was a fascinating and entertaining visit.



Helen presented me with this *Phaius tankervilleae* plant as a consolation for not being able to take part in the State Conference in 2023. I kept it in the pot, well watered, and was delighted this year to see a flower spike

forming. I managed to keep it free from everything else which found it interesting and have been rewarded with a magnificent floral display. It now has 18 blooms and promises a few more.