

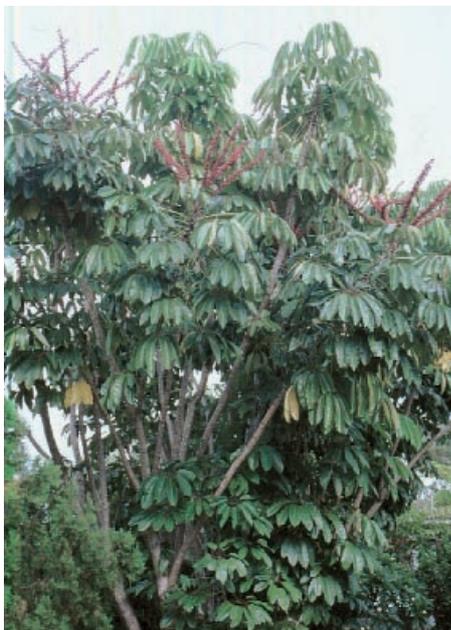


TREES FROM THE TROPICS

BY ANTON VAN DER SCHANS

An exotic fruit tree with large, leathery leaves is the Malay Apple (*Syzygium malaccense*). Clusters of dark pink flowers cover the branches, and are followed by pink-skinned, juicy fruit which resemble pears in shape and taste. The North Queensland native form of the same species, pink Satinash, is quite different in appearance, having slightly smaller, thinner leaves.

Another S.E. Asian species, *Syzygium megacarpa*, has even larger leaves up to 50 cm long, with heavy deep pink veins and pendulous when new. The large purple flowers along the branches are followed by fruit similar to the Malay Apple but even larger. Gowok (*Syzygium macrocephala*), yet another S.E. Asian species, has a similar thick-textured foliage, quilted with veins and purple when young. Fluffy white flowers cloak the branches, followed by clusters of black fruit.



Umbrella Tree

Red Bud Satinash (*Syzygium erythrocalyx*) is a native species with large leaves and spectacular red new growth. But its thin-textured foliage requires protection from hot, drying winds. With shade and plentiful water it will develop into a spectacular feature tree.

They say familiarity breeds contempt, and sadly this is true of the well-known Umbrella Tree (*Schefflera actinophylla*) in its native North Queensland, while in overseas countries it is greatly admired for its outstanding foliage and flowers. Provided its vigorous root system is respected and allowed for when selecting a position for the tree, it will make an outstanding garden specimen which is very hardy, fast-growing and attracts numerous birds. In gardens too small for it, young trees can be used as tough tub plants for the patio or indoors.

Another tree which is sometimes available, with foliage so closely resembling that of *Schefflera* that a few years ago it was sold in garden centres with a big label reading "No I'm not an Umbrella Tree", is *Schefflera pueckleri*. This species has slightly smaller, wavy leaves and lacks the colourful flowerheads.

Several native relatives of the Umbrella Tree from the wet tropic rainforests have been introduced in to gardening. Blue Nun (*Delarbraea michieana*) is a small, slender understory tree, closely resembling a palm with its bare trunk topped by a crown of compound leaves up to 80 cm long. Below these hang large bunches of iridescent blue berries. It is best suited to planting in groups in the shade of larger trees, and requires regular watering. Noah's Basswood (*Gastonia p. as yet unnamed*) has similar form, but grows much larger, to 10 m tall, and develops a small crown above its long, clean trunk. While the masses of tiny purplish grey fruit are not spectacular, its huge leaves up to 1.5 m long are outstanding. It is also very hardy and fast-growing, preferring full sun.

Another species sometimes mistaken for *Gastonia* is Ivory Basswood (*Polyscias australiana*). This small palm-like tree also has a palm-like crown of leaves over 1m long, but often branches near the ground to produce multiple trunks. Fruiting plants can be very eye-catching, with masses of small, shiny black berries borne on huge, intricately branched structures over 2 m across. This plant is also very hardy, but prefers partial shade, especially when young.

Three more distant relatives of exotic origins are also sought after by tropical gardeners. False Aralia (*Dizygotheca elegantissima*) from New Caledonia has very dissimilar



juvenile and adult foliage, so they are often mistakenly considered different plants. Young plants have very narrow leaflets with a purplish black tinge, gradually developing broader, dark green leaves as they mature into elegant small trees.

**Barringtonia**

The Snowflake Tree (*Trevesia palmata*) is named for its intricately lobed leaves resembling snow crystals. This rare, small tree requires well-drained soil and shelter for its bold but brittle foliage. The Bayur Tree (*Pterospermum acerifolium*) is another species with spectacular foliage consisting of broad, dark green leaves which are silvery white underneath. It will probably remain scarce in nurseries because it seems to rarely set seed, although it can be propagated with some difficulty by marcots (*air layering*) or cuttings.

A North Queensland species which can be quite common in the limited areas where it naturally occurs, such as along rivers and creeks in the Innisfail-Babinda and Cape Tribulation areas, is *Canarium acutifolia*. This moderately large tree casts dappled shade with its open crown of 1m long compound leaves, and produces spectacular flushes of red new growth in the wet season.

BOGGY AREA

Trees with large, lush foliage can also help to evaporate boggy areas in the garden. Leichardt Tree (*Nauclea orientalis*) is a familiar sight along North Queensland river floodplains, reaching over 15 m in height, which limits its use to larger gardens. Its broad leaves drop during winter but reshoot quickly. The prolific flowers are distinctively spectacular white-tipped golden spheres. A close relative, *Anthocephalus chinensis* is similar in appearance but almost evergreen. Despite its more tropical origin it has proved much hardier and more cold tolerant than Leichardt Tree, growing well as far south as Sydney.

**Nauclea orientalis**

A much smaller distant relative is one of several species known as native gardenias. *Randia fitzalanii* rarely exceeds 5m and its dense foliage and bushy growth make it ideal for screen planting. The broad, glossy dark green leaves contrast well with its lightly perfumed, white star-shaped flowers. This plant has proved adaptable to conditions ranging from wet and shady to much drier and exposed, either prune as a large shrub or small tree.

Another tree preferring wet soils is the Malay Clothes Hoist Tree (*Fragraea crenulata*). As suggested by the common name, this rapid-growing tree has an open canopy with branches in distinct layers, bearing broad, bright green leaves up to 60 cm long. Older trees have a trunk adorned with blunt thorns. This tree requires an open position to develop its spreading canopy.



BEACHSIDE AREAS

Not all gardens in the wet tropics are blessed with abundant rainfall, or rich moisture-retentive soil. This is particularly true in sandy beach areas, where water drains rapidly and soft plants soon wilt. However, it is still possible to achieve a lush character without consuming vast amounts of precious water, by selecting some of the native strand plants which grow naturally near the beach, as well as some exotics from similar environments.



Randia fitzalanii

Boxfruit (*Barringtonia asiatica*) has huge, paddle-shaped, glossy leaves, red new shoots and some autumn tones on old leaves. The 15 cm pink and white tassel flowers open at night, so the tree should be planted where it can be seen and enjoyed. A medium sized tree to about 8m, it casts useful shade and produces interesting 4-sided fruits.

Sea Hearse (*Hernandia nymphaefolia*) has glossy, thick-textured, heart-shaped leaves with a red spot in the middle. The highly decorative seed capsules are translucent bells flushed with pink, which hang in clusters like Chinese lanterns. A medium-size tree, it has only recently become widely propagated.

Portia Tree (*Thespesia populnea*) is closely related to hibiscus and has similar single, yellow flowers with a dark throat, and glossy, dark green, heart-shaped leaves. A slow-growing tree, it can be kept pruned to a large shrub.

Beach Almond (*Terminalia catappa*) is a huge, spreading tree, sometimes despised for the heavy litter of large leaves and nuts it produces. However, appropriately sited it can be an excellent fast-growing, tough shade tree, while permitting views and breezes under its canopy. It is also one of the very few tropical trees to produce a spectacular autumn colour display, when the leaves turn a brilliant red.

Two other coastal trees from the Caribbean are justifiably popular in beachside gardens. Sea Grape (*Coccoloba civifera*) is a small, sprawly tree with very thick leaves, patterned with red veins. New growth is also flushed coppery red and older leaves develop autumn tints before falling.

Pendulous branches of small, sweet fruits give the tree its name, and older trees pruned with clean trunks display a bonus feature of attractively patterned bark.



Red Bud Sainash (Syzygium erythrocalyx)

Pork Fat Tree (*Clusia rosea*) is a uniquely attractive tree with an unfortunate name. Native to coastal rainforests where it often starts life as an epiphyte, it is suitably equipped with slender aerial roots. In an open position it develops a dense canopy of large, rounded, succulent leaves, in some plants slightly variegated with lime green marblings. Sometimes shy to flower, the short-lived blooms are 12 cm across, white and delicately flushed with pink. This is also a hardy tub plant which can even be grown indoors.