

## BUSH TUCKER - WHITE PAPERBARK - (Melaleuca leucadendra)

By Greg Calvert

All scientific names have a meaning, although often the literal translations are quite meaningless. The name 'Melaleuca' means black and white, since the first person to name them had seen them shortly after a bushfire! 'Leucadendra' means "white tree"; so here we have a black and white, white tree! It's all rather confusing really.

Also known as "Tea Tree", "T tree" or "Cajuput", Melaleuca leucadendra is the graceful large tree overhanging Ross River and most other tropical coastal rivers in northern Australia. Spreading from Queensland into Northern Territory and Western Australia, the White Paperbark may occur as a graceful arching tree over rivers and lagoons or may occur in tall, straight, pure forests up to 40 metres high. There are great examples of this at Slade Point near Mackay, along the road near Ingham and in Cooktown. Although usually found in association with fresh water, the northern beaches of Cape Bedford, between Cooktown and Cape Flattery, are lined in White Paperbark trees and are often inundated by salt water at high tide!

White Paperbark is a popular ornamental with its white trunk, graceful habit and sweet-smelling white or green bottlebrush flowers. Rainbow Lorikeets flock to the Paperbark when flowering and Flying Foxes actually prefer Paperbark blossoms to mangoes; so they could be planted to alleviate crop losses from fruit bats.

It seems to be tolerant of extreme water-logging, clay soils and seems able to withstand cyclones with the greatest of ease. The fine mat of roots makes this tree the first choice of people doing revegetation work along river banks and unstable slopes which require some stabilisation.

Aborigines also found many uses for the White Paperbark. Strips of bark would be carefully cut from the tree and tied to a frame of Dodonaea branches to form waterproof huts. Food would be wrapped in this same bark before cooking in an underground oven known as Kap Mari. Although temperatures in the oven are high, the paperbark doesn't ignite because there is no oxygen and the tender moistness of the food is preserved. Paperbark was also used in funeral ceremonies and bodies would be carefully bound in Melaleuca bark before being placed in a cave or rock cleft devoted to such purposes.

Stripping the bark off trees can make the tree look unsightly and can reduce the tree's resistance to fire and insect attack; so it should be removed sparingly out of public view and not all from a single tree. Trunks of very large specimens were sought after for making canoes in some areas.

Following the example of birds and bats, the nectar can be sucked directly from the flowers. Take care to avoid bees. I was stung on the lip recently and I can assure you it is not a pleasant experience! A safer alternative is to dunk the nectar-laden flowers into a cup of water and continue the process until a sweet cordial has been obtained. This liquid can then be strained to remove foreign articles.

The name "Tea Tree" derives from the fact that an infusion of the leaves makes quite a passable tea substitute. Young leaves are preferred. This is also regarded as being a good cure for coughs and colds.

Overseas, Melaleuca leucadendra has achieved both popularity and notoriety, becoming a weed in some areas. It has not achieved the extreme pest status of that other Australian paperbark, Melaleuca quinquenervia. There is, however, no good reason I can think of not to include one in your garden.