



# Koala Kolumn

Everyone knows that koalas eat gum leaves – lots of them. However, they do swallow other things, including water and dirt. In any one region koalas will usually concentrate on a small number of eucalypt species from the range available. Preferred species are categorized into primary and secondary food trees. Koalas typically will not eat all types all year long. Seasonal issues play a major role and so do individual preferences.

On the Northern Rivers, primary food trees are Forest Red Gum (*e.tereticornis*), Tallowwood (*e. microcorys*), and Swamp Mahogany (*e. robusta*). Some secondary species include Flooded Gum (*e. grandis*), Grey Gum (*e. propinqua*), Blackbutt (*e. pilularis*) Sydney Blue Gum (*e. saligna*), Scribbly Gum (*e. signata*), Grey Ironbark (*e. siderophloia*), White Mahogany (*e. acmenoides*) Forest Oak (*Allocasuarina torulosa*), Brush Box (*Lophostemon confertus*), Pink Bloodwood (*Croymia intermedia*) and Broad-leaved Paperbark (*melaleuca quinquenervia*).

The water content of the average eucalyptus leaf suitable for koala consumption is 50%. During dry periods when leaves become dehydrated and when heat prevents morning dew from forming, koalas may look for water. Fortunately, so far this summer, our canopies are in good shape. Ingestion of dirt is important for the operation of its very large caecum.

Koalas engage in various behaviours to regulate temperature. Most of their bodies are covered with heat-absorbing grey fur but their chests are white, apart from the male's scent gland. In cooler weather they curl up in a ball to keep themselves warm

(and dry). Because they are a nocturnal animal, most of us see them tucked in to the crook of a tree, asleep. Those thick coats are not shed in hot weather, rather the animal lies back, leaning against the branch with both arms and legs dangling, leaving their white chest exposed to the breeze. Clever, ah? They can look so completely indolent that the casual observer may think the animal is in trouble, or drunk (the myth of the drunken koala is still surprisingly widespread).

Mating activity continues through January although nowhere near the frenetic pace of Spring. Gestation lasts about 35 days and the baby koala, like the young of all other marsupials, is born in a relatively undeveloped state.

Known as a 'neonate', it weighs less than .5 grams. After emerging from the mother's urogenital opening, it climbs up through her belly fur and enters her pouch. Many females are carrying pouch-young during January. Last year's offspring is independent although living in close proximity, sharing her range and often feeding in the same tree.

Friends of the Koala operate a native plant nursery that specializes in koala food trees which are provided free of charge to landholders in areas where koalas are found. If you would like to know more about habitat and planting, brochures are available at the Nimbin Environment Centre.

Please report sick, injured or dead koalas to Friends of the Koala by phoning the Rescue Hotline: 6622-1233. If you want to report sightings either phone or fill out a sightings sheet which is also available from the Nimbin Environment Centre. If you have questions you want answered about koalas, their habitat or Friends of the Koala's work, please email us at <friends\_koala@hotmail.com>

Happy koala spotting and remember to keep your dogs indoors at night.



If you see a sick, injured or dead koala call the koala rescue hotline: 6622 1233



People power. The Nightcap Forest Festival planning group in action.

## by Sophia Hoeben

The inaugural meeting of the Nightcap Forest Festival planning group was held at the back of the Oasis Café on 1st December.

The meeting decided on a five-day event, commemorating 25 years since the successful campaign that saved the Nightcap Forest.

The celebrations are planned to commence on 17th October with the setting up of a camp at the former protest site on Mt Nardi, and ending on the 21st with a special Nightcap Forest



market during the day and a closing ceremony on the mountain in the evening.

A concert, featuring local artists performing the original songs from the Nightcap action, and numerous other bands, is also on the drawing board.

Historical display At this stage, the call goes

out to all former Naggars, and anyone who may be holding any historical material of the time, to please come forward. All treasured photos and items for the historical display will be treated with the utmost care. As most of the memorabilia of the time seems to have been lost to time or erosion, any photos loaned for the display will be laminated for preservation, with your permission.

If you are interested in helping out with organising the festival, why not attend the next meeting on Friday 2nd February at 4pm, at the back of the Oasis Café?

## Illawarra Flame Tree *Brachyhyton acerifolius*

This is one of the most noticeable Australian trees, a medium to large tree with shiny maple-like leaves.

In most years it sheds its leaves before putting on a spectacular display of bright red bell-like flowers that cover the canopy, and last from mid spring to summer. In some years, only one or two branches manage to flower.

The Flame tree is fast growing, tolerates dry conditions, thrives in almost any well-drained soil and attracts butterflies and insectivorous birds. An outstanding specimen tree or windbreak, it is a superior substitute for the Liquidambar styraciflua.

The leaves are large, glossy and bright green and quite attractive lending the plant to indoor container use when young, provided sufficient light is available. It's also a good shade tree for extended periods of the year.

Native to New South Wales and Queensland, the Flame tree is found in coastal rainforest from North Queensland to Shoalhaven, NSW. It's sometimes planted alongside the Jacaranda tree, as they are both deciduous and flower at the same time of year creating a wonderful display.



In full bloom. This magnificent example can be seen now in Coronation Park, The Channon.

This tree adapts well in most areas and will reach between 10 and 30 metres in height depending on the situation. It often only grows to 10 metres high or less in cultivation. Acerifolius will grow well in most soils benefiting from regular watering.



## Monkey Nut Tree by David McMinn

Monkey Pot is the common name given to species of the genus *Lecythis*, which may have potential as a nut crop in our area. They are native to the rainforests of Brazil through to Central America.

The common name comes from the fruit, which is a pot-like woody capsule containing the delicious nuts. These pots have a detachable lid at the top. The name refers to the monkeys' eagerness to get the seeds inside the pot-like receptacles. Young monkeys would stick their paw into a 'pot' and be unable to pull it out as their paw was filled with nuts.

Another common name, Paradise Nut, is given to some species, because of their excellent eating qualities. *Lecythis* species are closely related to the nutritious Brazil Nut, which are far too tropical to be grown locally. Fortunately, some *Lecythis* species are more cold-hardy and will grow in our sub-tropic climate if given a warm, frost free micro climate.

The trees of some of the species become very large (over 35m) and thus they are only suitable for growing on large, acreage gardens or in productive rainforests. The bark of *Lecythis* species separates into thin sheets like paper, and is used by Amazonian Indians for cigarette papers. The timber is very durable, and suitable for construction purposes as it is resistant to fungal attack and dry wood termites.

A friend obtained some seeds directly from Brazil and now has three Monkey Pot trees growing on his property. However, the trees take 15 years to produce their first crop, when they have been grown from seed. There may also be problems with pollination. The related Brazil Nut tree is fertilised by a specific species of bee native only to the Amazon. If the Paradise Nut was similarly pollinated by certain insect species, then the tree will not yield nuts in Australia. Thus the friend may never produce a nut crop, even if the trees grow well.

Unfortunately, I do not know of any other plant enthusiasts in Australia, who are growing Monkey Pot trees. Monkey Pot species are currently not available in Australia, due to the lack of propagating material. Importing seed may be an option.

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