

Nature Notes

Junior Ranger

BLUDGING BROAD-LEAF

The Broad-leaved Native Cherry of the Top End, *Exocarpus latifolius* begins its life as a freeloader, relying on the roots of others to help it grow.

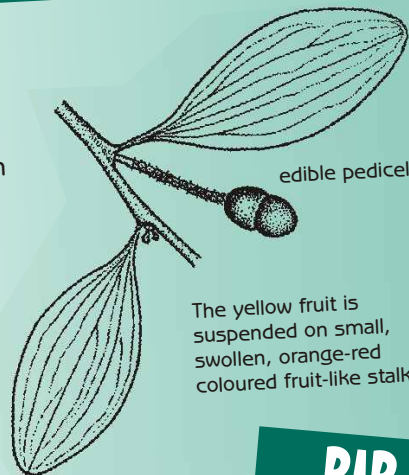
This plant is semi-parasitic meaning that for its seedling to grow its roots must first tap into the roots of a neighbouring tree to steal food and water (nutrients). However, as it grows bigger and taller, it relies more on its own ability to trap sunlight with its broad evergreen leaves to provide its food (photosynthesis).

CENTRALIAN COUSIN

In the arid regions of NT, there lives a Centralian cousin, the Slender Cherry, *Exocarpus sparteus*. It also starts life as a parasite and grows on rocky hillsides amongst Spinifex or on sand dunes. Unlike its Top End cousin, it is only a small broom-like shrub 2-3m high. This is where it gets its other common name Broom Ballart. It has a swollen pink or red stalk that is also edible. Like most plants living in the desert, it has narrow leaves to help it to save water.

WHY THE NAME 'NATIVE CHERRY'

Native Cherries have odd-looking 'fruit'. On closer inspection, you can see that they consist of a swollen fleshy stalk (called a pedicel) which actually looks like a fruit on which the real seed bearing fruit (nut-like) grows. So why does nature provide these weird variations to normal fruits? Basically, it ensures that the plant's seed is spread (called dispersal). Many fruit eating birds cannot help eating the seed to get to the juicy pedicel. Once in the bird's stomach, digestive juices eat away the tough outer shell of the seed and it is almost ready to grow. The bird flies off and does a poo dropping the ready seed. The seedling then gets a good head start from the nutrients present in the bird's poo.



The yellow fruit is suspended on small, swollen, orange-red coloured fruit-like stalks

SCIENCE SNIPPET

Photosynthesis is the process that plants use to make their food. They collect energy from the sun with their leaves, then use it to change water and carbon dioxide (what we breathe out) into sugary food (carbohydrates). Luckily, for us this process also produces oxygen for us to breathe.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Latin name *Exocarpus* makes sense, as loosely translated it means 'nut or seed on the outside of a fleshy fruit'.



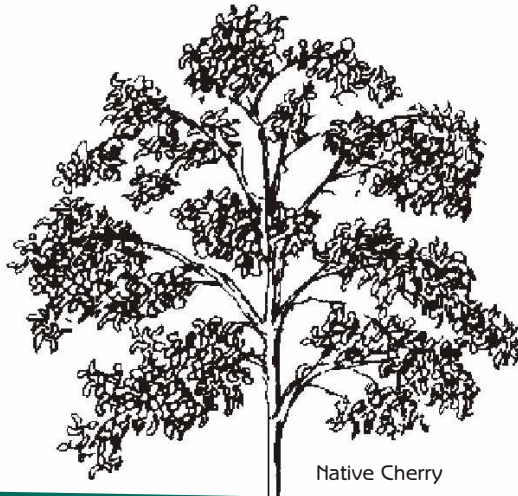
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TREE IDMORE FEATURES OF ME!

My bark is dark grey with little cracks in it.

You may find me in monsoon vine thicket or forest and beside water.



Native Cherry

I am a bushy shrub or small tree.

I live in all types of soil but just love sand.

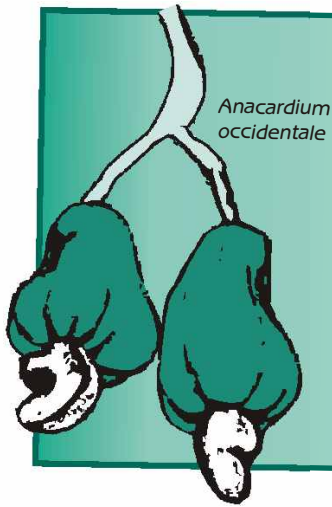
I can grow up to 6m tall.

WHAT AM I?

The strangeness of the fruit of the Native Cherry is not unique to this plant or Australia. Other plants in the world also have this adaptation. Can you crack the code to reveal the name of another well known introduced plant (pictured) with a similar feature?

Clue:
Native Cherry is mzgrev xsviib and *Exocarpus latifolius* is vclxzikh ozgrulorfh. Also think about how the fruit is back to front.

x z h s v d m f g g i v v



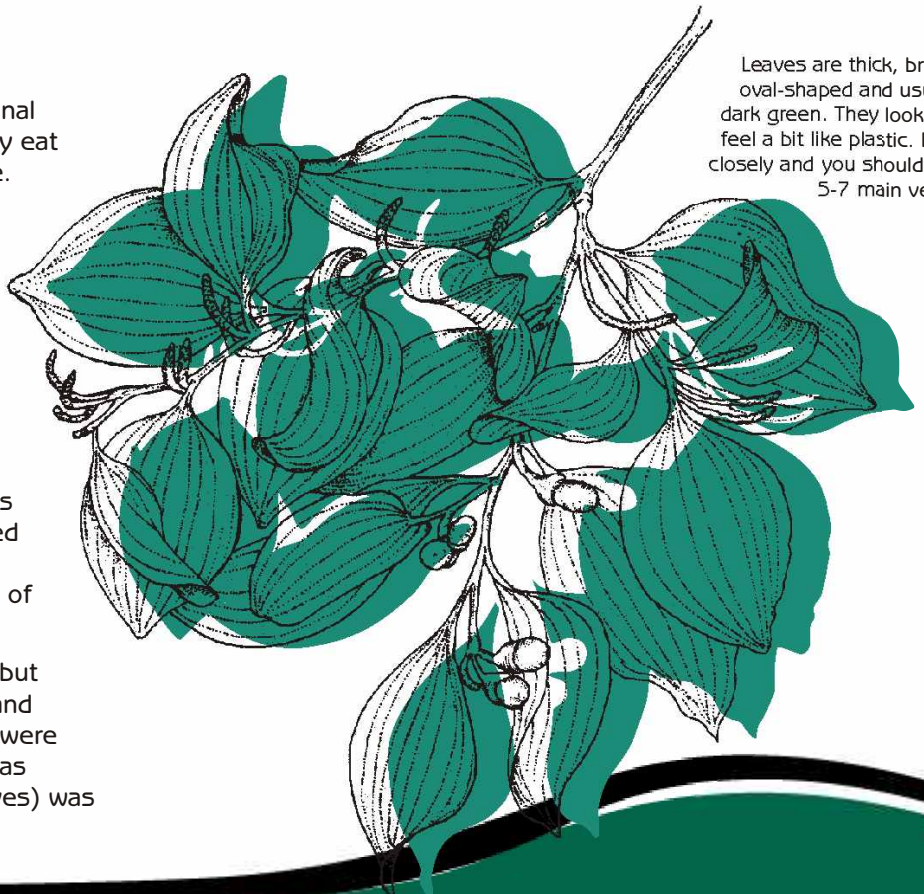
BOUNTIFUL FRUIT

Long before European settlement Aboriginal people had many uses for this plant. They eat the swollen fleshy pedicel when very ripe. The wood and leaves are burnt and the smoke produces an excellent mosquito repellent. The wood is used for making yam digging sticks and for woomeras (spear throwers).

EARLY SETTLERS USE

In southern Australia the Native Cherry excited early English settlers, who liked its taste enough to collect the fruits for added fresh food supplies. They saw it as an example of the upside down strangeness of Australia's plants and animals.

The fruit was eaten raw or cooked, but was only picked when deep red and ready to fall. The early farmers were cautious of the plant, as it was known that the foliage (leaves) was toxic to stock.



Leaves are thick, broad, oval-shaped and usually dark green. They look and feel a bit like plastic. Look closely and you should see 5-7 main veins.

