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[Home](#) [About](#) [Contact](#) [Events Calendar](#) [Site Map](#)

[»TREAT Home](#) [»Resources](#)

The Sarsparilla Restaurant

From TREAT News August 1997, p 3
by Elinor Scambler

Alphitonia petrei (Rhamnaceae family) - commonly known as Sarsparilla - is a common edge species in the Wet Tropics rainforest. It provides food for an amazing variety of vertebrate and invertebrate animals.

Many birds and insects are attracted to the NECTAR and POLLEN (flowering time on the Tableland around September and October).

The FRUIT is eaten by the Superb Fruit-Dove, Brown Cuckoo-Dove, Lewin's Honeyeater, Victoria's Riflebird, Australian King Parrot, Crimson Rosella, Double-eyed Fig-Parrot and - after the fruit falls - the Southern Cassowary.

TWIGS are eaten by stem-boring beetles and their larvae (grubs). The LEAVES are an important part of the diet of the Herbert River Ringtail Possum and Lumholtz Tree-Kangaroo, found only in the Wet Tropics region.

The LEAVES are also eaten by larvae of the beautiful butterfly Danis hymetus (Small Green-banded Blue); five species of Geometrid moths; and moths from three other families.

Studies in the Wet Tropics near Paluma, around 900m above sea level, showed that very young Sarsparilla leaves are hairy and gummy, and the old mature leaves are tough and high in toxins. Geometrid moth larvae much prefer young but still growing leaves which are nutritious, have got over the hairy stage, and haven't yet developed tough outer layers with high chemical loads. The result is that 90% of the insect damage occurs during only 20% of the life of a Sarsparilla leaf, and while it is still growing.

So the Sarsparilla has evolved with excellent defences for both its very young and its mature leaves, while still providing a very important rainforest food source.

Thanks to Dr Robyn Jackson, CRC-TREM/ Zoology Department, JCU; and Margit Cianelli

Other references: 'The food of Australian Birds' (Barker and Vestjens, CSIRO)

Seed Treatment - Improving Germination

by Tania Murphy

Editor's note: Tania Murphy outlines germination techniques including breakthroughs in Alphitonia germination..

Getting a good germination rate from seeds is more than just luck. The art of growing trees from seed can be quite complex for many species and very simple for others.

Important considerations for growing seeds

- Seed type, viability and dormancy
- Seed treatment to overcome dormancy
- Materials required to grow seedlings
- When to sow seed
- Caring for seedlings and hygiene

Seed Treatment

Treating seeds to overcome dormancy could be considered a science in itself. Hard seed-coats can be treated with heat by boiling/ hot water, dry heat, microwave heat and scarification (e.g. nicking, filing, chipping, cracking or piercing a small section of seed). Natural weathering or harvesting immature fruits is another option for hard seeded fruits. Chemical inhibitors in seeds can be overcome by leaching, washing or soaking. More recently, much work has been done on investigating the use of smoke to overcome dormancy in many Australian natives that belong in fire tolerant plant communities.

Trials in the Nursery

Recent trials by the Queensland Department of Primary Industry - Forestry, have shown that germination of Alphitonia petrei seeds benefited from hot water treatment. After cleaning, seeds were treated with boiling water and left to soak in the water for 48 hours before sowing. We tried this in the Lake Eacham Nursery and found the treatment to be helpful for several species of Alphitonia.

If you have any queries about seed sowing or have some suggestions or experiences to share, talk to us at the Nursery.



[↑ Top of Page](#)

More Newsletters

- TREAT Newsletter Archive The Sarsparilla Restaurant (this page)
- [TREAT Newsletter Archive - Trees foil sweet-tooth rats..](#)
- [TREAT Newsletter Archive Rainforest Rehabilitation on Christmas Island](#)
- [Previous TREAT Newsletters](#)

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[Join TREAT](#)
[Calendar](#)
[Contacts](#)
[Site Map](#)

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[Peterson Creek](#)
[Donaghy's Corridor](#)
[Barron River](#)
[Walter Hill Range](#)

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[Newsletter Archive](#)
[Info-Notes: How to...](#)
[Mabi Forest](#)
[Planting for Wildlife](#)
[Weeds](#)