



Photo 1

Bushtucker in the Top End

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Bush tucker encompasses a vast variety of foods consumed by Aboriginal people in their native environment. Each group of people in different regions and in their different tribes have different plants that they use, and some have different names for the same plant. These are some examples from the Top End of the Northern Territory.

When collecting bush tucker and native seeds in the Northern Territory, a permit is required and royalties must be paid on most species. For further information please contact the Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory a division of the Department of Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts, or visit their website at <http://www.nt.gov.au/ipe/pwcnt/>

No responsibility is taken by the Northern Territory Government for any injury caused from the use of these plants.

*Other websites for bush tucker information include:
<http://www.dpi.qld.gov.au/home/> <http://www.rirdc.gov.au/>*

Name: Green Plum *Buchanania obovata* (Anacardiaceae)

Distribution: Found from Daly Waters to the Top End and Arnhemland.

Australian Distribution: Also in the Kimberley region and on the Queensland – Northern Territory border around Wollongorang.

Habitat: Found on a wide variety of well-drained sites, from sandstone country to shallow stony soils. Understorey tree in open forest and woodland.

Description: Small scraggly tree from 4–10 m, with rough dark grey bark. Leaves are alternate, and egg-shaped, large thick and leathery and are dull grey-green with a prominent raised mid rib. Flowers are small creamy and numerous on terminal bunches. Fruit are small and hard green and they look like very small mangoes.

Culture: Can be grown from seed.

Fruiting Season: Flowering from July - October and fruit from October - December.

Harvesting: Fruit turns yellow-green and soft when ripe.

Culinary Use: Fruit is generally eaten raw.

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Name: Pandanus *Pandanus spiralis* (Pandanaeae)

(photo 1)

Distribution: Found throughout the Top End near river systems and flood plains.

Australian Distribution: Also in northern Western Australia and Queensland.

Habitat: Found in poorly drained areas along streams, floodplain edges and swamp margins, open forest and woodland, and coastal dunes and foreshore.

Description: Multi-stemmed tree to 10 m, with grey-brown bark with distinct leaf scars. Leaves are crowded spirally toward the end of the branches, and are long and strap like with small spines along the margin and midrib. Flowers are small, white in dense clusters, with male and female flowers on different trees. Fruit are round clusters of woody segments, containing 5-7 seeds similar in size to pine kernels.

Culture: Grown from fresh seed.

Fruiting Season: Fruit available from June - October.

Harvesting: Fruit are bright orange to red and smell fruity when ripe.

Culinary Use: The woody fruit segments are cut open and the seeds extracted and eaten raw or roasted.

Name: Red Bush Apple *Syzygium suborbiculare* (Myrtaceae)

Distribution: Common throughout the Top End, Arnhemland and Melville Island.

Australian Distribution: Also found in coastal areas of the Kimberley and in far north Queensland.

Habitat: Understorey tree in open forest, woodland, sandy coastal plains and sand dunes.

Description: Medium tree to 12 m with slightly rough grey-brown bark. The dark glossy green leaves are leathery and oval to circular with a pointed tip. Flowers are large and white with numerous stamens, found in dense terminal clusters. Fruit are fleshy, round with distinct ribs and a persistent calyx, and contain one large seed. Another form found in Melville Island is the 'Pink Beach Apple' which is sweeter than the red bush apple.

Culture: Grown from fresh seed and is popular as a small ornamental shade tree.

Fruiting Season: Fruit available during the wet season from October - March.

Harvesting: When ripe the fruit is red in colour, and the skin is marked with fine cracks when the fruit has reached peak ripeness. The pink beach apple is pale pink when ripe.

Culinary Use: Fruit is eaten raw when ripe and is slightly bitter but crisp and crunchy.

Notes: The pink beach apple is much sweeter and is highly regarded by the Tiwi people.



Photo 2

Name: Tamarind *amarindus indica* (Caesalpiniaceae)

(photo 2)

Distribution: Found in most coastal areas of the Top End. Tamarind is a naturalised species thought to be brought here by the Macassan traders as early as the 17th Century.

Australian Distribution: Extends to coastal areas of tropical Western Australia and Queensland.

Habitat: Found in coastal monsoon vine forests on sand dunes and inland near watercourses.

Description: A large spreading tree to 25 m, with rough grey bark in a checked pattern. Leaves are dull green, alternate and compound with oblong leaflets. Flowers are small, pale yellow with red-brown markings and hang in loose racemes. Fruit is an oblong capsule containing several hard brown seeds embedded in reddish brown pulp.

Culture: Grown from seed but very slow. Makes a good stable shade and shelter tree.

Fruiting Season: Fruit available from August - October.

Harvesting: The capsules, or pods, are ripe when they turn light brown and are soft to touch.

Culinary Use: The fleshy pulp of the fruit is eaten raw and has a strong spicy flavour. The skin and seeds are not eaten. The pulp can also be used as flavouring in cooking.



Name: Billy Goat Plum *Terminalia ferdinandiana* (Combretaceae) (photo 3)

Distribution: Widely distributed throughout the Top End from the Victoria River District to Arnhemland.

Australian Distribution: Also found in the Kimberley.

Habitat: Found on well-drained soil in open forest and woodland areas.

Description: Small deciduous tree to 10 m, with rough creamy grey bark. Leaves are large, smooth and broadly elliptical to circular, light green with distinct veins and spirally arranged towards the ends of the branches. Flowers are small, cream and sweetly scented on long spikes in the leaf axils. Fruit are fleshy and ovoid with a short beak containing one seed.

Culture: Grown from fresh seed.

Fruiting Season: Fruiting at the end of the wet season from March - June.

Harvesting: Fruit are ripe when they are pale yellow-green and soft. They are generally collected from the ground.

Culinary Use: Fruit are eaten raw and are slightly fibrous with a pleasant taste. They contain vast quantities of vitamin C, about 50 times that of oranges.

Name: Wild Grape *Ampelocissus acetosa* (Vitaceae)

Distribution: Found in the Darwin region and through to Arnhemland and Melville Island.

Australian Distribution: Also found in coastal North Queensland and the northern part of Western Australia.

Habitat: Most commonly found in open forests and woodlands, often on gravelly sites in sandstone or lowland country. Also sometimes found in coastal monsoon vine forests and thickets near freshwater streams.

Description: A semi-erect shrub or scrambling climber, sometimes prostrate with a single woody stem with spines and tendrils, arising from a perennial tuber. Leaves are large and compound, divided into 5-9 leaflets of variable size and shape. Leaves are dark green and pale underneath with a roughly toothed edge. Flowers are very small and purple with yellow stamens in clusters opposite leaves. Fruit is a round berry in grape like clusters with 2-4 small seeds.

Culture: Little known but possibly from seed or pieces of tuber. Not grown in cultivation.

Fruiting Season: Available from February - April.

Harvesting: The grape-like fruit is dark purple to black when ripe.

Culinary Use: Fruit is eaten raw when fully ripe and have a sweet grape like taste. Seeds should not be eaten. Tubers are roasted then eaten, and the leaves are used to wrap meat to improve flavour before cooking.

Notes: Native grape dies off at the end of the wet season and shoots appear again after the first rain in the build-up. *A. frutescens* is very similar, but the plant is more upright, and the fruit is eaten in the same way.

Name: Long Yam *Dioscorea transversa* (Dioscoreaceae)

Distribution: Found in the Top End, Arnhemland and Melville Island.

Australian Distribution: Not found in other regions in Australia.

Habitat: Found in coastal monsoon vine forests often rambling into open forest.

Description: Annual slender climber with a perennial elongated tuber. Leaves are alternate, heart shaped with small lobes on the leaf base. Flowers are small, pale green and found in clusters in the leaf axils, and are sweet smelling. Fruit is a distinct three-winged capsule with three circular brown seeds.

Culture: Little tried but possibly from seed and pieces of tuber.

Fruiting Season: Yams are available from February through the dry season.

Harvesting: The vine is found and followed down to the ground, to locate the tuber, which is then dug up.

Culinary use: Yams can be eaten raw but are generally boiled or roasted. They are considered a staple food and much sought after.

Notes: In the Tiwi Islands, another yam *Dioscorea bulbifera* or round yam is used in the same way. This yam has much cultural significance for the Tiwi people, and there are rules for its harvest and consumption of the tubers. *Amorphophallus galbra* is another yam called 'cheeky yam', which is prepared and eaten in the same way.

Name: Wild Passionfruit *Passiflora foetida* (Passifloraceae)

Distribution: Found extensively throughout the Top End.

Australian Distribution: Occurring from the Hamersley range in northern Western Australia, to coastal areas of Queensland and northern New South Wales.

Habitat: Will grow in a variety of habitats, from monsoon vine forests and thickets to open forests and woodlands. Common in disturbed areas and has become a weed for gardeners and rural block owners.

Description: Vigorously climbing vine with thin woody stems and tendrils in the leaf axils. Leaves are alternate and oval shaped with three distinct lobes. Leaves and stems are covered in short yellow hairs. Flowers are white with purple centres and three feathery green bracts. Fruit are round with many black seeds embedded in white pulp and covered by the feathery bracts until ripe.

Culture: Grown easily from seed, but not cultivated as it is considered a weed.

Fruiting Season: Fruit is available all year round.

Harvesting: Fruit is yellow/orange when ripe and the feathery bracts have shrivelled up.

Culinary Use: The fleshy pulp and seeds are eaten raw, but the skin should not be eaten.

Notes: **WARNING** Extreme care should be taken when handling this plant as the hairs on the leaves and stems can severely irritate skin and if rubbed near the eyes can cause blindness. The skin of green fruit is also highly toxic. Eating too much ripe fruit acts as a laxative.



Name: Water Lily *Nymphaea violacea* (Nymphaeaceae) (photo 4)

Distribution: Found all over the Top End, from Victoria River Downs to Arnhemland.

Australian Distribution:

Habitat: Found in freshwater lagoons, swamps, billabongs and slow moving waterways up to 2 m deep.

Description: Perennial aquatic herb with a tuber in the mud. Leaves are floating and roundish with lobes on the leaf base. Flowers are large and showy with numerous petals from white to bluish-purple and many yellow stamens. Fruit are round and spongy with many small seeds, and are found underwater.

Culture: Little tried but possibly from seed and pieces of tuber.

Fruiting Season: Fruit are available from January - July.

Harvesting: Fruit begin to break apart when ripe. Tubers are also dug up and collected.

Culinary Use: Seeds can be eaten raw or roasted. They are also ground into flour and made into damper and cooked. The tubers may be eaten raw or roasted and the flower stems are peeled and eaten raw.

Notes: The seeds are considered a valuable food and much sought after. The seeds and tubers are also good medicine for diarrhoea. **WARNING** Saltwater crocodiles inhabit many of the waterways where water lilies are found.

References:

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