

Plant of the Month

by Allan Carr

Leptospermum liversidgei

Lemon-scented Tea-tree/ Swamp May

Pronunciation: lep-toe-SPERM-um liver-SID-gee-eye

MYRTACEAE

Derivation: *Leptospermum*, from the Greek *leptos* – thin or slender, *sperma* – a seed, (a reference to the small seeds); *liversidgei*, after Professor Archibald Liversidge who was instrumental in introducing science as a subject in Australian Schools and Technical Colleges over a hundred years ago.



Habit Flowers, leaves Fruits

There are around 82 species of *Leptospermum* of which all but 4 are endemic to Australia. Of those, 3 are found in New Guinea, Indonesia and south-eastern Asia and the fourth species, *L. scoparium* is widespread in New Zealand as well as NSW, Vic and Tas. The common name of tea-tree originated from leaves of this species being used as a tea substitute by some of Captain Cook's sailors.

Description: *Leptospermum liversidgei* is an erect twiggy shrub, usually 1 to 3 m in height with a spread of about 1 to 2 m. It grows in coastal wallum country of southern Qld (from near Bundaberg) and northern NSW (to Port Stephens) especially in low-lying sandy and swampy *heath.

Leaves to 6 mm x 2 mm are alternate and narrowly *obovate. These bright green leaves are strongly lemon-scented when crushed and show conspicuous oil glands when viewed with a hand lens. New growth is hairy and sometimes reddish. *L. petersonii*, is also called "Lemon-scented Tea-tree", and produces a similar lemony essential oil.

Flowers to 12 mm with 5 petals and many stamens are borne from November to February. These are usually white but can be pink.

Fruits are woody capsules about 8 mm across that develop close to the stems. Sometimes these become partly sunken in the stem as they are *persistent from one flowering season to the next. They have 5 *exserted valves which contain hundreds of tiny seeds.

*heath = an area of open ground covered by heathlike plants (such as those of the Ericaceae family) especially on acid, sandy or peaty soils

*obovate = inversely ovate (upside down egg shaped); wide at tip like an egg upside down

*persistent = not shed readily

*exserted = bulging outside