

Plant of the Month - December

by Allan Carr

Castanospermum australe

Moreton Bay Chestnut

Pronunciation: cas-tan-oh-SPUR-mum os-TRAR-lee

FABACEAE

Derivation: *Castanospermum*, from the Greek, *castanon* – the chestnut tree, *sperma* – a seed, because the large seeds resemble chestnuts; *australe*, from the Latin, *australe* – southern.



Habit



Flowers



Large compound leaves



Fruits, seeds

Castanospermum is a monotypic genus found in riverine rainforests of Queensland and New South Wales. It also occurs in New Caledonia and New Hebrides. An illustration was commissioned by Joseph Banks from specimens collected on Cook's voyage in 1770 and was eventually published in full colour in Banks' Florilegium in the 1980s. The species was named by Allan Cunningham in 1830.

Description: A densely foliated medium to large tree to 35 m often along watercourses. Widespread in rainforest and coastal scrubs from Cape York Peninsula, Qld to the Bellinger River, NSW. The timber is hard, chocolate brown and is a valuable cabinet wood.

Leaves are alternate, shiny dark green above, paler below and *pinnate with 9 to 19 leaflets each to 200 mm by 40 mm, one terminal.

Flowers are pea-like, red and yellow to 30 mm in *racemes to 150 mm. They are attractive to a large variety of nectar feeding birds like the Noisy Friarbird (*Philemon corniculatus*) in the photo at the right. Flowering occurs from October to January.



Fruits are woody, hairless pods to 250 mm by 50 mm with 2 to 5 large, round, chestnut-like poisonous seeds with brown skin. These are eaten avidly by various native marsupials and rodents. Aboriginal people used the seeds as a food source after thorough preparation by soaking, drying, roasting and pounding repeatedly to remove toxins. The seeds have been shown to contain alkaloids which have anti-HIV and anti-cancer properties.

*pinnate = having leaflets arranged on each side of a common stalk (like a feather)

*raceme = an unbranched flower stem with flowers on stalks