

Plant of the Month - February

by Allan Carr

Alphitonia excelsa

Pronunciation: al-fit-OWN-ee-a ek-SELL-sa

soap tree
RHAMNACEAE

Derivation: *Alphitonia*, from the Greek, *alphiton* – baked barley meal (referring to the red mealy matter around the seeds); *excelsa*, from the Latin, *excelsus* – elevated, lofty (referring to its tall habit).



Chewed leaves (undersides)



Buds, flowers, sugar ant



Fruits, both green and mature

There are about 20 *Alphitonia* species, mostly in tropical areas around the world with 7 or 8 extending to Australia.

Description: *A. excelsa* is a tree to 18 m, sometimes smaller, that occurs in deep sands on forest edges in coastal and near coastal areas from northern Qld down into southern NSW. It is also found in northern WA and NT. The bark is usually distinctively mottled with a variety of lichens. Young parts of the plant are covered in rusty hairs and smell of sarsaparilla when crushed. The common name comes from the ability to form a soapy froth when leaves are rubbed with wet hands. This is due to a high *saponin content.



Bark

Leaves to 150 mm x 55 mm are alternate, green above with an under surface of silvery-white with fine hairs. Their edges are slightly curled under and frequently show much damage after being eaten by various leaf chewing insects including caterpillars of the Small Green-banded Blue butterfly (*Psychonotis caelius*).

Flowers are creamy-green, tiny, 5-petalled and borne in *axillary clusters from November to April.

Fruits are dry, black, globular to 12 mm across with reddish-brown seeds inside.

Aboriginal people used the leaves in water to stun fish for easy catching.

*saponin = a chemical compound that normally foams when exposed to water or a water solution

*axillary = arising from the angle between a leaf and stem

Habit

