

Plant of the Month - April

by Allan Carr

Melastoma malabathricum* subsp. *malabathricum native lasiandra, blue tongue

Pronounced: mel-ah-STOME-ah mal-ah-BATH-re-cum MELASTOMATACEAE

Derivation: *Melastoma*: from the Greek, *melas* – black and *stoma* – a mouth (the berries stain the mouth dark blue when eaten). The specific name, *malabathricum* = from Malabar, South-west India.



Mauve form



White form



Fruits

Melastoma is a genus of about 90 species occurring in India, China, South-east Asia, Malaysia, Pacific Islands and Australia, where there is this single species. For many years we knew this plant as *Melastoma affine* but since 2001 it has been known as *M. malabathricum* subsp. *malabathricum*. There is now an exotic species of this genus showing up in south-east Qld gardens and nearby bushland. It can be distinguished by the leaf venation shown in the photo below. However, the only sure way is to look at the hairs where they join the underside of the leaf, preferably with a hand lens. Our native species has tapered hairs slightly widened at the base.

Description: *M. malabathricum* subsp. *malabathricum* is a small to medium shrub which grows to 2 to 3 m in height in moist to wet soils and is found in tropical countries to the north, across the north of WA, NT, Qld and down the east coast to Kempsey in NSW.

Leaves are opposite, *elliptical, rough textured and dark green to 100 mm x 40 mm. They have three prominent veins and two marginal veins as in the leaf on the left in the photo on the right. Caterpillars of the Coral Jewel butterfly (*Hypochrysops miskini*) have been found feeding on the leaves. (

Flowers to 60 mm across are mauve to pink or more rarely white with 5 petals and prominent yellow *anthers. The flowering period is normally from November to January but can be sporadic.

Fruits to 10 mm across are globular and hairy berries with tiny seeds and edible purple pulp which stains the mouth and tongue when eaten.



Native species

Exotic species

In north Qld these berries are eaten by Double-eyed Fig-parrots (*Cyclopsitta diophthalma*).

*elliptical = tapered evenly at each end, broadest in the middle

*anther = the part at the top of the filament, together with which makes up the stamen