

WHAT'S FLOWERING THIS MONTH



Dillenia alata by Russell Dempster

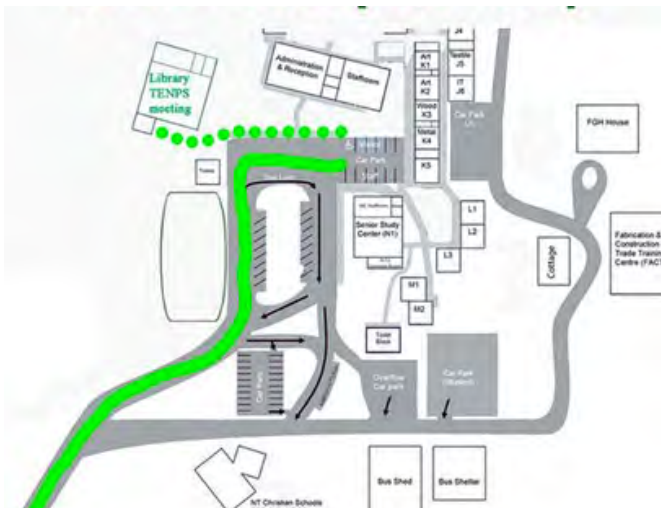
MONTHLY MEETINGS

Top End Native Plant Society (TENPS) general meetings are held at 7:00pm on the third Thursday of the month at Marrara Christian College library on the corner of Amy Johnson Ave and McMillans Rd. Bring your plants to swap, sell or have identified over a cuppa. The guest speaker presents at 8pm.

This month's talk will be by Ian Morris on the history of Kakadu National Park.



NEXT MEETING: NOVEMBER 20TH 2025



TENPS (Top End Native Plant Society) Committee Members

President: Russell Dempster
(0459440665)

Vice President: Sean Stieber

Secretary: Johanna Stieber

Treasurer: Graham Zemunik

Publications and Librarian: Richard Boyne

General Committee Member: Ian Morris

General Committee Member: Claire Hewitt

Publicity: Vacant please inquire

Webmaster: Vacant please inquire

Public Officer: Dave Liddle

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VISIT OUR FACEBOOK FOR INFO ON OUR NEXT EVENTS AND SALES!

September meeting: *Cycas armstrongii*: In search of John Armstrong by Lon Wallis

On numerous TENPS field trips around Darwin I wondered who the Armstrong was after whom *Cycas armstrongii* and *Syzygium armstrongii* were named. A quick online check revealed a bit of a mystery man: his date of birth is unknown; he died in Timor; and he was the gardener at Port Essington from 1838.

Fortunately, several books on Port Essington do include some detail regarding Armstrong's time there as gardener. These include *Forsaken Settlement* by Peter Spillett, *Port Essington - The historical archaeology* by Jim Allen, and *Port Essington - The British in North Australia 1838-1849* by Derek Pugh.

Apparently, Armstrong's superiors at Port Essington claimed that they knew nothing of his contract with the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew to also collect plant specimens for them. They insisted that his duty was as gardener alone. He was so frustrated by this limitation that he resigned after two years.

The Plant Collectors

We need to put Armstrong into the context of the mid-19th century which saw plant hunters as daring explorers who risked their lives to bring back exotic species to the gardens of Great Britain.

We know that Armstrong was the third European plant collector in the Northern Territory. The first two were selected by Sir Joseph Banks who had been appointed as the official adviser to the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew. Robert Brown collected in eastern Arnhem Land in 1803 as part of Matthew Flinders' expedition on the *Investigator*. Allan Cunningham collected in coastal Arnhem Land as part of Phillip Parker King's voyages from 1818 to 1821.

Port Essington was the third attempt to establish British control over Northern Australia. The previous sites of Fort Dundas 1824-1829 and Fort Wellington 1827-1829 had proven to be unsatisfactory. Sir John Barrow – Second Secretary to the Admiralty – had been a keen proponent of the first settlement, and also supported this third attempt.

Barrow and Staunton

It was Sir John Barrow who in 1837 appointed John W. Armstrong as the gardener at Port Essington, with a salary of £200 per annum. He did so on the advice of Sir George Thomas Staunton of Leigh Park in Surrey. In 1837 Staunton was employing Armstrong as an assistant gardener at Leigh Park. Staunton commented favourably on Armstrong:

'He appeared to me a clever, enterprising young man and a great deal too good for the humble situation he held with me of third gardener; and therefore recommended him to our friend Sir John Barrow through whose influence he was afterwards appointed upon the expedition in Port Essington.' (Staunton to Hooker 1 August 1841)

Armstrong's employer George Thomas Staunton had strong connections with the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew. When Staunton was twelve, he accompanied his father Sir George Leonard Staunton who had been appointed secretary to Lord Macartney's mission to China. Sir Joseph Banks sent two gardeners from Kew to accompany this mission. At that time John Barrow was young G.T. Staunton's maths tutor; and also accompanied him to China.

G. L. Staunton brought back a species of flowering plants from China, and the genus of *Stauntonia* is named after him. From Java, he also brought back examples of nutmeg and mangosteen to Sir Joseph Banks. Banks also assisted G. L. Staunton in writing his report on the mission. Both Staunton and Barrow therefore had strong connections with Kew Royal Botanic Gardens.

Some methodology

In attempting to discover John W. Armstrong's birth date I trawled through the dozens of John Armstrongs in Ancestry.com. Using his known death place and date I did find his birth date and place: 10 Mar 1792, Odiham, near North Warnborough, Hampshire. More importantly, I also made contact with a member in England who was also investigating John W. Armstrong. Jeanne Renshaw is a researcher for the *Hampshire Garden Trust magazine*. In 2022, at the same time that I was researching Armstrong, Jeanne was preparing her article: *John Armstrong (1793-1847) – Hampshire's Forgotten Plant Hunter*.

Her research revealed that Armstrong was the son of a plant nurseryman, also named John Armstrong. His nursery was located on the banks of the Basingstoke Canal, which enabled the transportation of plants directly to London. Initially, a successful business, it included clients such as the brother of the novelist Jane Austen at nearby Chawton.



*Surviving portion of Armstrong's house
(later additions to the left)*

*Image courtesy of Jeanne Renshaw
Hampshire Garden Trust*

In addition to the plant nursery, both Armstrong and his father were also talented surveyors.

Unfortunately, when John W. Armstrong was 23, his father was declared insolvent.

It is not until 1829 that we next hear of Armstrong. From Buenos Aires he writes to Sir William Hooker, Regius Professor of Botany at Glasgow University. He comments that he has not forgotten to collect plants for Hooker, although he has been taken up with other business. Armstrong appears to be quite religious. He finishes his letter with:

*O, the providential care of a Benevolent and loving God,
for God is Love.*

Armstrong comments that he had received help from Dr. Gillies, a Scottish botanist who spent 8 years in South America in an attempt to alleviate the effects of his tuberculosis. Gillies travelled extensively, surviving earthquakes and civil wars. One would think that Gillies would rank as one of the famous Plant Collectors. However, Gillies is all but forgotten today, despite having a number of plants named after him. A similar fate was to befall Armstrong.

The next year Armstrong is in Belize, British Honduras. Belize had long been famous for the production of Logwood (*Haematoxylon campechianum*). This was widely used in dyeing fabrics. However, by Armstrong's time Mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*) was Belize's most important industry. This is the age of Chippendale mahogany furniture.

It is not clear what Armstrong was doing in Belize, but again his comments to Hooker indicate that plant collecting was merely a sideline to whatever business he was engaged in. I did come across a reference to a company in Belize named Armstrong & Lewis. So far, I haven't been able to discover whether this is our John W. Armstrong.

We next hear of Armstrong in October 1836 when he delivers a lecture on Botany to the Chichester Mechanics Institute. This adds to the evidence that Armstrong consistently saw himself as a botanist rather than a humble gardener.

After being selected by the Admiralty for the position of gardener at Port Essington Armstrong was also fitted out by Kew Royal Botanic Gardens to collect plant specimens for them. He writes to botanist John Smith - the curator - to store his papers and books for him.

Aboard the *HMS Alligator* Armstrong collected plants at every stopover: Tenerife, Rio de Janeiro, Cape of Good Hope and even Port Jackson. In Sydney he delivered a lecture on botany at the School of Arts. He was consistently referred to as a Botanist.

John W. Armstrong arrived at Port Essington on board *HMS Alligator* on 27 October 1838. He was at Victoria settlement for 741 days. He left for Kupang on the schooner *Lullworth* on 3 November 1840.

Sir Gordon Bremer, Commandant of Port Essington was not impressed with Armstrong as a gardener: *'We have not yet derived much benefit from our public garden. I fear my botanist is too great a Gentleman (in his own opinion) to grow cabbages and pumpkins, but the latter are becoming abundant in the gardens of the men.'*

Her research revealed that Armstrong was the son of a plant nurseryman, also named John Armstrong. His The cyclone of 25 November 1839 made matters worse by destroying Armstrong's garden. By July 1840 Armstrong informed the Acting Commandant that he refused to do duty as the gardener to the colony. Armstrong packed his botanical specimens and arrived in Kupang on the island of Timor on 14 November 1840.

Kupang

Armstrong writes to William Townsend Aiton, superintendent of the Royal Gardens Kew, explaining that he resigned because he couldn't both collect plants and carry out his duty as the gardener. He complains that his living conditions were intolerable. He offers to be a Botanical Collector for Kew at Kupang for £150 per annum. He describes how he and the Kupang Resident made a botanical excursion to the head of Kupang Bay.

We learn from Armstrong's letters to Aiton that he had sent 597 specimens in February and an additional 340 since, totalling 937 specimens to Kew. It was his policy to collect 12 examples of each specimen.

In December 1845 Armstrong writes to Hooker, who had been appointed as the Director at Kew Royal Botanic Gardens in 1841. Armstrong relates how he had previously grown sugar, but has now changed to growing rice. He analyses the strengths and weaknesses of 12 varieties of rice.

He offers to collect plants for a Flora Timorensis, saying that the Botanist would find a greater number of rare and useful plants on the Island of Timor in one day, than he would in one month on the whole of the North Coast of New Holland. Nothing came of these offers by Armstrong to collect for Kew.

He continued to live on his estate at Prilly, which today is on the outskirts of Kupang.

The last we hear regarding Armstrong is a letter of June 1847 to Hooker announcing his death. It appears to be from his wife A.E. deRooy.

Controversies

There are several controversies regarding whether Armstrong actually collected particular specimens at Port Essington. A 2004 TENPS article claimed that *Cycas armstrongii* has a limited natural distribution, occurring only in the Darwin district, and therefore the type must have originated from the Darwin area. However, Dave Liddle contradicts this distribution, stating that he has indeed identified *C. armstrongii* at Port Essington.

Several specimens supposedly collected by Armstrong at Port Essington were probably introduced by him from Timor, because they have not been found to occur naturally in Australia.

Rubus moluccanus var. *discolor* (Bl.)

Croton armstrongii S. Moore

Dichrostachys cinerea (L.) Wight & Arn.

Indigofera cordifolia Heyne ex Roth

Armstrong is also one of the many suspects accused of introducing the weed *Mesosphaerum suaveolens* (hyptis) to Northern Australia.

Place in History

John Smith, Curator at Royal Botanic Gardens Kew summed up Armstrong's collection as "of not much account". Indeed, unlike some of the famous Plant Hunters, Armstrong did not introduce any exotic plants to the gardens of Great Britain.

To some extent, Armstrong does indeed merit Renshaw's title of 'Forgotten Plant Hunter'.

However, I could find 194 species of Armstrong's Australian specimens recorded in *Flora Australiensis*, published in seven volumes between 1863 and 1878 by George Bentham and Ferdinand von Mueller. Of course there have been many revisions since then. *Cycas armstrongii* has not yet been split off from *Cycas media*. *Syzygium armstrongii* is still listed as *Eugenia armstrongii*.

Kew currently holds 108 species collected by Armstrong; including 66 from Australia; 30 from Brazil; and one each from Honduras and South Africa.

31 Armstrong type specimens held in Kew

Adiantum abscissum [Brazil]

Bonamia brevifolia

Croton jacobinensis [Brazil]

Cycas armstrongii

Cyperus conicus

Desmodium trichostachyum

Dracaena angustifolia

Eugenia essingtoniana

Euphorbia armstrongiana

Euphorbia pallens

Goodenia armstrongiana

Hypoestes floribunda var. *varia*

Hypoestes floribunda var. *yorkensis*

Indigofera colutea [South Africa]

Isotoma armstrongii

Odontonema tubiforme [Belize]

Osbeckia australiana

Plectranthus parviflorus var. *elatior*

Polygala orbicularis

Rhynchosia minima var. *australis*

Sauropus ditassoides

Spermacoce auriculata

Spermacoce leptoloba

Syzygium armstrongii

Syzygium minutuliflorum

Tephrosia filipes

Tephrosia porrecta

Terminalia grandiflora

Trachymene didiscoides

Tylophora macrophylla

Vigna lanceolata var. *filiformi*

OCTOBER FIELD TRIP ~ WILLIE'S BLOCK AT HOWARD SPRINGS

We met at Willie Burgess' property on Barker Road, Howard Springs on Saturday 25 October. About a dozen TENPS members and friends were led by Willie on a walk around his block. The property was used previously to grow Foxtail Palms, with only a few now surviving. Willie has planted many native plant species, with many coming from the Borroloola and Gulf of Carpentaria area.



It was a very pleasant morning. A feature at the time of our visit was a *Pavetta brownii* (family Rubiaceae) (*top left*), a shrub which was looking resplendent covered in white flowers.



Micromelum minutum (family Rutaceae) was fruiting (*middle left*). These small trees are great for attracting butterflies and native bees. It was interesting to see a *Micromelum* from the gulf country with a furrowed inside branch (*bottom left*). Willie suggested that it could be an adaptation that captures moisture from the mists that frequently occur in the gulf environment where it grows to aid the plant in capturing moisture.



We tried some bush tucker as we walked around. The evergreen *Buchanania arborescens* (family Anacardiaceae) and *Sersalisia sericea* (family Sapotaceae) were both agreeable to our taste buds. *Syzygium suborbiculare* (family Myrtaceae) from the Tiwi Islands was also fruiting. Other flowering plants we saw included *Ixora timorensis* (family Rubiaceae), *Coelospermum reticulatum* (family Rubiaceae), *Melaleuca minutifolia* (family Myrtaceae), *Acacia* sp (family Fabaceae), *Leea novoguineensis* (family Vitaceae), and *Grevillea agrifolia* (family Proteaceae).

Thanks to Willie for generously sharing your time with us and for showing the group your beautiful plants and property.

Report and photos: Russell Dempster



Buchanania arborescens



Syzygium suborbiculare



Brachychiton sp.



Ixora timorensis



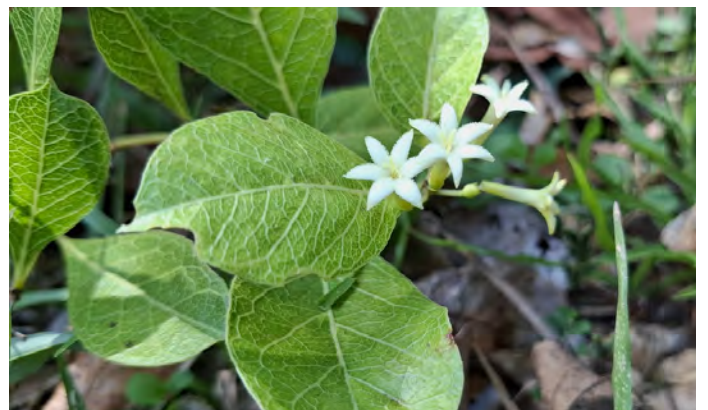
Leea novo-guineensis



Grevillea agrifolia



Acacia sp.



Coelospermum reticulatum



NOVEMBER FIELD TRIP

This month's field trip will be on Saturday the 22nd of November at the block of Jeremy Russell-Smith and Di Lucas in Berry Springs. Meet at the Berry Springs Nature Park at 8.30am and car pool out. Bring hat, water and sunscreen.

The following weekend will be the Annual Event and Plant Sale, hosted by Riyala. Other societies will be there, so it's a great way to meet people and learn about biodiversity!

Annual Event & Plant Sale **Top End** **Native Plant Society**

Entry by gold coin donation ... thanks

RIYALA, 255E GULLICK ROAD, NOONAMAH
SAT, 29 NOVEMBER 2025 | 8AM-2PM

NATIVE PLANT SALES
 Create an edible garden, restore habitat and support native wildlife.

- FOOD, COFFEE AND COLD DRINKS**
 Join us for a sausage sizzle and scones
- ANIMAL ENCOUNTERS & NATIVE PLANTS FOR NATIVE BEES**
- NATIVE PLANT/WEED ID & ADVICE**
- LIVE MUSIC ARTS & CRAFTS**
- RIYALA RAINFOREST NATIVE PLANT & ANIMAL TOURS!**
- SPECIALIST NATIVE PLANT SPEAKERS**
- BOOK SALES**

BECOME A MEMBER! Plant Sale Member Discounts!
 To become a member email topendnativeplantsociety@hotmail.com

Riyala *Territory Wildlife Park* *Territory NATIVE PLANTS*

TENPS AGM

The Annual General Meeting of The Top End Native Plant Society Incorporated will be held at 7.00 pm on Thursday 20th November 2025 at Marrara Christian College, on the corner of Amy Johnson Avenue and McMillans Road.

We ask all members to make a special effort to attend the AGM. This is very important for the continued running of the society. Reports will be tabled and all committee positions will be declared vacant before a new committee is elected. Please consider if you can contribute to TENPS by nominating yourself or getting someone to nominate you for a position on the committee. A reminder that we need a new president, as Russell will not be continuing in the role. Nominations can be made to the committee before or during the meeting.

The AGM agenda is as follows:

1. Meeting open and Welcome
2. Apologies
3. Minutes of Previous AGM

3.1 Business arising from minutes of previous AGM

4. Committee Report
5. Treasurer and Auditor's Report

6. Election of Management Committee

- 6.1 President
- 6.2 Vice President
- 6.3 Secretary
- 6.4 Treasurer
- 6.5 Publicity Officer
- 6.6 Publications Officer
- 6.7 Librarian
- 6.8 Two committee members

7. Other Business

- 7.1 Appointment of Public Officer
- 7.2 Membership Subscription Fee
- 7.3 CDU Scholarship

Ian Morris will follow as our guest speaker for November with a presentation on the history of Kakadu National Park. Ian's talks are always interesting and informative so don't miss it!



BECOME A MEMBER!
Member discounts for plant sales.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION
(Due annually on 1st July each year)

The Top End Native Plant Society is a community group aimed at **PROMOTING AND ENCOURAGING THE APPRECIATION, CONSERVATION AND STUDY OF FLORA NATIVE TO THE TOP END AND THE DIVERSE HABITATS OF THIS FLORA**. The Society is active in the propagation and cultivation of Top End native flora.

Visitors are welcome to meetings held on the third Thursday of the month at 7.00 pm with a speaker starting soon after. The venue is Marrara Christian College, on the corner of Amy Johnson Avenue and McMillans Road. Guest speakers are a feature of meetings and field trips are undertaken each month to a diverse array of habitats.

New Membership Renewal

Membership fees are:

Individual Waged:	\$35.00
Family Waged:	\$45.00
Individual Unwaged:	\$15.00
Family Unwaged:	\$20.00

Payment: \$ _____

Family name: _____

Name/s: _____

Email address: _____

Postal address: _____

To pay online:

Bank Bendigo Bank

Account Name: Top End Native Plant Society

BSB: 633 000

Account: 207 974 247

Note: Please include your name in the transfer reference and email the information in this form to topendnativeplantsociety@hotmail.com


Or pay in person at meetings or events where cash or card will be accepted.

Follow 'Top End Native Plant Society' on Facebook for information on current activities and events.

topendnativeplantsociety@hotmail.com

www.topendnativeplants.org.au

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