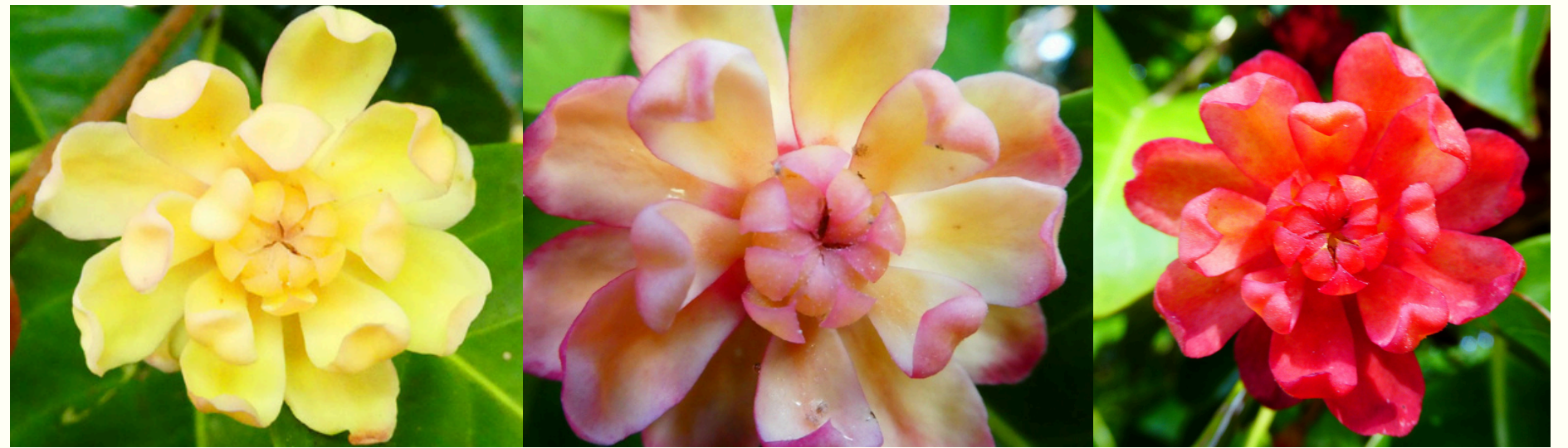


May 2026

Plant of the month



Ribbonwood



About

Ribbonwood belongs to an ancient flowering plant lineage. This species was first discovered in 1902 south of Cairns by a German botanist, Ludwig Diels who named it after comparing it to a fossil in the Dresden Herbarium. In the 1920's the Ribbonwood's habitat was cleared for sugar cane farming and the tree was thought to be extinct.

However, in 1971 it was re-discovered in very strange circumstances. Cows belonging to a Daintree farmer died mysteriously and the government veterinary surgeon was called. An autopsy revealed several large seeds in the cow's stomach, which were identified by botanist Stan Blake as belonging to the Ribbonwood tree. The offending tree was removed by the farmer, but nearby Blake found another stand of trees and seedlings.

The fruit is large and heavy and the seeds are so poisonous, no animals or birds eat them. This helps to explain the tree's limited distribution. Seeds may once have been dispersed by Australia's ancient megafauna, most of which went extinct in the Pleistocene era (1.6 million to 10 000 yrs ago).



Join a guided tour

Scan the QR code to join a guided tour to learn more about our plants and science.

Native Habitat

Mature lowland rainforest to 200 metres.

Distribution

Endemic to the Humid Wet Tropics of NE Queensland.

Description

A medium sized, evergreen tree growing to 15 metres, with glossy leaves 10 - 17cm long and 3.5 - 5.5 cm wide.

Flowers

Small and spirally arranged, with creamy white tepals that change to pink and then red as they age. They are fragrant and attract beetles and thrips as pollinators.

Fruit

Fruit are large and globular, about 5 - 5.5 cm by 6 - 6.5 cm. Whilst most flowering plants produce seed with one seed leaf (monocotyledons) or two (dicotyledons), seedlings of the Ribbonwood have between two and five cotyledons. Seeds are black and poisonous.

Find us on social media:



@BotanicSydney

DISCOVER MORE

botanicgardens.org.au

Common Name: Ribbonwood

Scientific Name: *Idiospermum australiense*
(Diels) S.T.Blake

Family: Calycanthaceae

Genus: *Idiospermum* – from the Greek, “Idios”, unusual and “sperma”, seed.

Species epithet: *australiense* - Australian