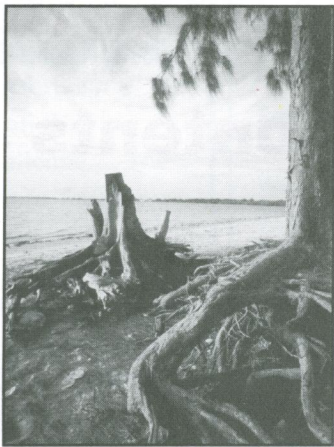


# Editorial



This issue of *Wildland Weeds* is filled with information about plants native to Australia (truth is, we could fill volumes with Aussie weeds!). Part of the inspiration for this special issue was Brian Walter's Society for Growing Australian Plants web page ([www.ozemail.com.au/~sgap](http://www.ozemail.com.au/~sgap)) based in New South Wales, Australia. When I first visited this site over a year ago, I was amazed to find that people from all over the United States were emailing him for advice on how to grow some of Florida's worst weeds (melaleuca and carrotwood to name a few). Needless to say, I sent Brian my own email message, the gist of which was: "Quit being so globally helpful!" Since then, Brian and I have exchanged tons of information and...we actually have a lot in common. Seems Brian's Society is extremely sensitive to the problem of invasive exotics, and never intended to push weeds on other continents -

think of this group as Australia's Native Plant Society. They've updated and expanded the web site. It now includes lots of information on Australian plants as invasive exotics elsewhere. Look for his article "The Queensland Umbrella Tree" in this issue of *Wildland Weeds* - seems schefflera's considered troublesome in parts of Australia!

Would anyone in Florida hesitate to give someone in Queensland helpful tips how to grow slash pine or pond apple? Probably not, and that's a problem. It's hard to think of our favorite natives as pests elsewhere...but they are. Although this issue focuses on Australian plants that are pests in Florida, we're planning a future issue that will look at Florida natives behaving badly elsewhere. So...Pull up a vegemite sandwich and read on!

*Amy Ferriter*  
Editor

## THE QUEENSLAND UMBRELLA TREE (A Look at Schefflera Down Under)

Brian Walters

Australian Plants Society, New South Wales, Australia



**S**chefflera actinophylla (formerly Brassia actinophylla,) the umbrella tree, belongs to the Araliaceae, a large plant family of trees and shrubs, many of which occur in tropical areas. There are about 13 Australian genera in the family, including the genus Schefflera. The genus is represented in Australia by two species: *S. actinophylla* and *S. versteegii*, a relatively recently discovered species from the Cape York peninsula. Both of these species are also found naturally outside of Australia.

The umbrella tree is one of Australia's most widely cultivated native plants. It is well known throughout Australia and in many places overseas, particularly in warmer parts of Europe and the USA [see companion article, "Schefflera on the Loose in South Florida."]. Its distinctive, glossy-green foliage and unusual and conspicuous flowers have made it an attractive ornamental species for gardens and street plantings. It grows particularly well in tropical and sub-tropical areas but is robust enough to succeed in temperate regions (if it is protected from frost), especially coastal areas. The species is tolerant of a range of soil types but prefers deep soils with plentiful moisture. Umbrella tree is widely grown as an indoor container plant and is popular as a host species for epiphytic orchids.

### Natural Distribution

The umbrella tree occurs naturally in humid coastal Queensland from about Rockhampton (just south of the Tropic of Capricorn) to Cape York, the northern tip of Australia. It also occurs in Australia's Northern Territory as well as Papua New Guinea and adjacent islands. It is a widespread rainforest species inhabiting

lowland swamps and exposed rocky outcrops.

### Growth Characteristics

The umbrella tree produces a dense, spreading canopy usually supported by several slender trunks with foliage being restricted to the top few metres. In its natural habitat, the plant may reach 10 metres (30 ft) in height with a spread up to 4 metres (13 ft). The common name is derived from the way the 5-10 large leaflets radiate out from the end of a leaf stalk. The individual leaflets are elliptically shaped, glossy green in colour, and around 30 cm (12 inches) long. In contrast when cultivated in temperate climates, the plant rarely exceeds 3-5 metres (10-15 ft) in height but will grow larger in tropical areas.

The small, red flowers have conspicuous white stamens and develop in clusters about 2 cm (0.8 inches) wide on long racemes developing from the top of the plant. The racemes may be up to a metre in length. It is not unusual for 20 or more racemes to develop from each branch, each radiating from a central stalk like the spokes of a wheel. The flowers bloom from summer through autumn and are followed by black, fleshy fruits about 1 cm (0.4 inches) in diameter. The flowers and fruits attract honey and fruit-eating birds. Seeds are spread in bird droppings and germinate readily under suitable conditions. Under certain conditions, seeds may germinate on the trunks of trees and on rocks. Thus the species may grow as an epiphyte or a lithophyte. While tolerating cultivation in fairly small containers, the umbrella tree has a vigorous and aggressive root system when grown in the open ground and should not be planted within 5 metres of underground pipes. Plants tolerate heavy pruning and regenerate quickly after being cut back to almost ground level.

### Umbrella tree as a weed

Despite the popularity of the umbrella tree in cultivation, a more sinister side to the plant has been recently recognised; it is an environmental weed in parts of sub-tropical Australia and Florida. Unfortunately, there is little control on the sale of the plant in susceptible areas of both places. John Wrigley, author of several books on Australian plants and a horticultural consultant on the north coast of New South Wales (NSW), has observed *schefflera* in these areas and comments, "*Schefflera actinophylla* is a weed on the north coast of NSW. Its seed is spread by birds that relish the fruits. I have seen wattle birds, bower birds and even silvereyes eating the fruit. It is a common escapee in our area and in southern Queensland."

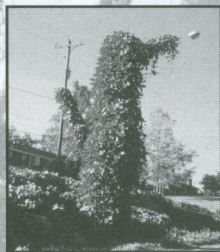
Like many plants that become pests, the umbrella tree showed signs of its potential weediness rather early, but these signs were not recognised until the problem had developed. Of course, hindsight is a wonderful thing but the following short article from 30 years ago certainly hints at the problems that now must be addressed.

"The most popular Australian tree grown here is *Brassaia actinophylla*, a splendid member of the Araliaceae. It is known here as the Queensland Umbrella Tree. Since South Florida is visited almost annually by storms, specimens of brassaia, for example, in excess of thirty feet are rare.

*Brassaia actinophylla*, when allowed to mature - and it is a very rapid-growing tree even in our often poor, rocky soils - flowers profusely, usually during the autumn months. Its fantastic, radiating inflorescence of red flower clusters is always attractive, and has given it the additional local vernacular name of Octopus Tree, and as such it is frequently offered hereabouts.

This araliad seeds freely, and they seedlings are widely offered elsewhere in the United States as house plants, and when larger, are extensively utilised as pot-specimens in hotels and other buildings. Interestingly enough, birds eat the copious fruits, and it is not a rarity to find seedlings of *Brassaia* sprouting as epiphytes (or semi-epiphytes) in the boot jackets of our indigenous palm, sabal palmetto, or even on mossy, fern-hung branches of dicotyledonous trees within the city limits of Miami."

Alex D Hawkes, Coconut Grove, Florida, USA  
From "Australian Plants", June 1967 (Journal of the Society for Growing Australian Plants)



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