

Trees 'n' Timber



Ron Allen

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Camphor Laurel *Cinnamomum camphora*

While preparing for a special walk in Botanic Park celebrating Planet Ark National Tree Day, I discovered some interesting facts about Camphor Laurel, and thought they might be of interest to Woodgroup members. The walk takes place on Sunday July 31st, starting at 2pm from the Friends Gates, Plane Tree Drive.

Derivation of names

Cinnamomum – from Greek 'cinnamomon', the cinnamon tree

camphora – camphor.

The common name refers to the camphor content and to the fact that it looks similar to the laurels – It belongs to the family Lauraceae.

Cinnamomum is a Genus of more than 300 species distributed over much of the tropical and subtropical regions of the world. There are five species native to Australia, the best known is Camphorwood or Olivers Sassafras, *Cinnamomum oliveri*.

The species of *Cinnamomum* have aromatic oils in their leaves and bark. The inner bark of several species is used to make the spice cinnamon. The members of the genus are generally known as cinnamon trees.

The Tree.

Camphor laurel is a large evergreen tree that grows up to 20–30 metres tall with a pale grey bark which is hard and fissured. The leaves have a waxy appearance and smell of camphor when crushed. Dry leaves seem to have a stronger aroma than green leaves. It produces masses of small white flowers which develop into black berry-like fruit.



Leaves and fruit

Timber

The wood is quite soft and light and works very easily. It is a popular wood for sculpture and carving in China. It has a prominent figure which is often enhanced with a range of colours from pale yellowish brown to oranges and reds. Most of the Camphor Laurel grown in Adelaide is quite small and has little heartwood colour. I remember being surprised by a relatively small tree we obtained from the Waite Arboretum some years ago. We all thought that it would be bland, but the colours were quite outstanding. It was planted in 1928 and was about 80+ years old when it died. There is a magnificent specimen in the Adelaide Botanic Gardens which is more than 150 years old.



Magnificent camphor laurel in Adelaide's Botanic Gardens

The most characteristic feature of the wood is the strong camphor aroma which remains in the wood for some time. This aroma can cause irritation for asthma sufferers.

Uses

Camphor is a white waxy solid or crystalline substance which is extracted from the wood of Camphor Laurel as well as some other members of the laurel family. Camphor is used in a number of ways. It is used for its scent, as a culinary spice in Indian Cooking, as flavouring in Asian sweets. It is also used for medicinal purposes, religious ceremonies and as insect repellent and flea killing substance. Camphor is an active ingredient in anti-itch and skin cooling gels as well as an active ingredient in vapour steam products including the familiar Vicks Vapour Rub. Despite it being used in foods and medicines it is poisonous when ingested in larger quantities.

Celluloid, a compound made from nitrocellulose and camphor is regarded as being the first thermoplastic. It was created as Parkesine in 1862 and as xylonite in 1869 before being registered as celluloid in 1870. It was largely used as packaging and childrens dolls and is no longer widely used except for table tennis balls and guitar picks.

Because of its insect repellent qualities, Camphor laurel is prized for use in blanket boxes and chests as well as linen cupboards. It is an excellent and colourful craft timber.



The wood

Habitat

Native to China, Taiwan and Japan. Camphor laurel was introduced to Australia as an ornamental species about 1822. It has become naturalised in the coastal area from Nowra on the south coast of New South Wales to Cooktown in North Queensland. It is now considered a pest and has been declared a noxious weed in some places. It is very invasive in the cleared rainforest areas and is creating a major threat to native species. Many of the southern infestations contain only young trees, from 3 to 10 years in age. Therefore, the potential for continued spread and domination of the landscape in many areas of the coastal fringe is significant.

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