

SOAP TREE

Alternative name: Red Ash

FAMILY: RHAMNACEAE

SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Alphitonia excelsa*



Form and size:

Small to medium tree with a conspicuous crown because of the dark green upper surface and the silvery white undersurface of the leaves.

Leaves:

Simple, alternate and somewhat two-ranked, entire, broadly elliptical to oblong ovate, 5 - 14cm long.

Adult leaf -

Topside: glossy dark green

Underside: dense cover of minute silvery whitish hairs below with brown hairy buds.

Bark:

Young trees: greyish smooth

Larger trees: longitudinally fissured and rough

Flowers:

Short, axillary panicles (loose branching cluster of flowers) of small cream flowers and are fragrant summer to winter.

Flowering Period:

anytime


Fruit:

Black drupe-like, globular 6-10mm diameter

A ring-like scar is clearly visible around the base.

Fruit contains two cells with a powdery red covering. Each cell contains a single brown seed covered with a thin orange-red skin.



Ecological notes	Fruit and seeds eaten by many of the native birds. Nectar is eaten by the honeyeaters. It is a larval food plant of butterflies and moths.
Cultivation:	Germination is slow. Cuttings strike easily. Quick growing hardy tree suitable for a wide range of situations although prefers well drained soils. It is moderately drought tolerant.
Distribution:	<p>Widespread down the eastern seaboard and in Northern Territory. It is common in a range of communities including eucalypt woodlands, dry and littoral rainforests, riparian habitats and regrowth areas.</p>  <p>The map shows Australia with red dots representing the distribution of the Soap Tree. The dots are concentrated along the eastern seaboard from Queensland down to Victoria, and also in the Northern Territory. The labels 'EAST TIMOR' and 'AUSTRALIA' are visible on the map.</p>

OTHER INFORMATION

Disclaimer: *Rotary Club of Capricorn Coast can not take any responsibility for any adverse effects from the use of plants. Always seek advice from a professional before ingesting any part of a plant or using a plant medicinally.*

Timber: suitable for ornamental work, general building, flooring, tool handles.

Leaves and bark: contain *saponin*, a bitter-tasting substance that can be toxic. This protects them from birds and insects. It has been used to stupefy (stun) fish, making them easier to catch. Crushed leaves can be used for soap.

Medicinally used by Australian Aboriginal people for toothache and upset stomach. An infusion can be made from bark and roots, and used as a topical relief for aches and pain.

QUIZ TIME

1. What chemical does the leaves of the Soap Tree contain?
 - a. petroleum

- b. saponin
- c. formaldehyde
- d. benzene

2. How many seeds does each drupe contain?

- a. 2
- b. 4
- c. 6
- d. 8

3. Why do you think *Alphitonia excelsa* is called the Soap Tree?

- a. It smells like soap.
- b. It was named after Mr Soap.
- c. When the leaves are crushed in water, the saponin in the leaves produces a foamy product like soap.
- d. The bark looks like soap.

ANSWERS:

- 1. B
- 2. A
- 3. C

REFERENCES

CSIRO. (2020). *Australian Tropical Rainforest Plants*.

Melzer, R., & Plumb, J. (2011). *Plants of Capricornia*. Belgamba.

Williams, P., Kirkpatrick, S., Griffith University. Centre for Coastal Management, & Gold Coast (Qld.). Council. (2009). *Coastal Plant Pocket Guide*. Griffith Centre for Coastal Management.

Image 1

Australian National Botanical Gardens. *Alphitonia excelsa* flower and foliage.

<https://www.anbg.gov.au/gnp/gnp6/alphitonia-excelsa-dig-1274-sm.jpg>

Image 2

Alphitonia excelsa tree.

https://images.squarespace-cdn.com/content/v1/5bacb83e809d8e12a0e172eb/1563674334450-W7SKBG8LU6GVV4YVEBV3/IMG_3506.JPG?format=500w

Image 3

Native Plants Queensland. (n.d.). *Alphitonia excelsa* fruit.

<http://www.npqtownsville.org.au/wpsite/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Alphitonia20excelsa20.jpg>

Image 4

The Australasian Virtual Herbarium. (2022). *Alphitonia excelsa*.

https://avh.ala.org.au/occurrences/search?taxa=Alphitonia+excelsa#tab_mapView