

MEMBERS' PAGE

MORE ABOUT CAPE LILACS AND CATERPILLARS

IN 1978-79 I lived in Roebourne in the Pilbara where the winter deciduous Cape Lilac/White Cedar grow quite well when watered, and there were a few old trees around station homesteads and the older towns. My house had a row of about six rather stunted lilacs along the side fence which had not had adequate water to flourish. The White Cedar Moth caterpillars attacked them in the summers and I had to resort to the hessian band around the trunk to capture them. They aren't all bad, however, as the Horsfield Bronze-Cuckoos would turn up and feast on them. These are about budgie size, so they had a bit of a struggle to soften up and swallow the large adults. Unfortunately bronze cuckoos are a bit scarce around Perth.

So it is quite feasible that humans brought the caterpillars south, especially as they hibernate as chrysalids in web in protected corners and could easily come down under garden furniture or other outdoor gear with people shifting back to the big smoke.

Climate could also have played a part. The flamboyantly flowered and shady poinciana tree of Madagascar (*Poinciana regia*) was a garden favourite in the Pilbara. The poinciana moth whose green looper caterpillars reduce the large bipinnate frondy leaves to a skeleton and rain little brown droppings, reached the Pilbara from Darwin one year when the monsoon slipped south and we had about five weeks of humid weather. Over the next couple of years they found their way down to Exmouth and Carnarvon, so they could turn up here also. It would be interesting to hear if the White Cedar Moth similarly staged its way to Perth.

I have a huge lilac in my back yard. Occasionally the twenty-



Cape Lilac/White Cedar
Melaleuca azedarach

eights and the galahs which have found their way to Perth chop open the green fruit to extract the seed, but apart from its use as a meeting place and staging post for all the birds flying through North Fremantle (including black cockies while they decide whose turn it is to rip into my large peppermint, *Agonis*, to extract the borers), it's not providing much for the birds. I successfully controlled the caterpillars by a combination of ambushing them with a pyrethrum spray as they made their way up the trunk in the evening and trapping them in bag around the base when they come down in the morning.

So yes, the message is, grow native, or at least something the birds can feast, shelter or nest in. Turn your lilac into bowls, bookshelves and tables - it's not called white Cedar for nothing, the timber is superb.

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