

QUANDONGS

Claire Hall

You may have seen a plant growing in the bush with distinctive red fleshy fruits 2-4cm across and wondered what it is and whether it is edible.

The plant is the Quandong (*Santalum acuminatum*) or Native Peach, a shrub or small tree 1-7m high with pale green leaves and small greenish-white flowers. The fruit is a drupe (stone fruit) that changes colour from green to red when it ripens in late spring or summer. The Quandong is one of four members of the genus *Santalum* in WA which includes the Sandalwood, whose fragrant timber (including the roots) was a major export earner for WA in the late 19th and early 20th century. Sandalwood roots were used to make temple incense and carved objects in Asia. All members of the *Santalum* genus in Western Australia are root hemiparasites.

The name 'Quandong' was one of 400 Aboriginal words adopted by European settlers into the Australian English language from the Wiradhuri languages of southwest NSW in 1836.

The Quandong is one of Australia's most widespread plants, occurring in all mainland states. Fossilised Quandongs have been found in the coal seams of southern Victoria dating back 40 million years. In WA it grows along the coast southwards from Carnarvon and through to the inland. In the Perth metropolitan region, Quandong grows in coastal dunes and limestone, and also on the Darling Scarp.

Where emus are located they are major dispersers of Quandong seeds as they digest the fleshy part of the fruit and the stone is passed through the bird. The flesh of the fruit is eaten by beetles and moth larvae, and the leaves are eaten by the larvae of the Spotted Jezebel Butterfly and by a species of soldier beetle.



Quandong fruit in the bushland at Duncraig SHS.

Photo: Claire Hall

Both the fleshy part of the fruit and the kernel were a staple food of the Indigenous population and surplus fruit was collected and dried for up to eight years for later consumption. Dried Quandongs were reconstituted in water when needed. The flesh can be eaten raw, having a slightly sour and salty taste, hence it is more tasty if made into jams and relishes. The nutritional value of the Quandong is high and it contains outstanding antioxidant substances. The leaves are reported to have antibacterial and antifungal properties.

Early settlers would take their families on Quandong picnics and the fruit was gathered to make jams, chutneys and pies, particularly during periods of drought and the depression years when money was short.

Several methods of propagation are recommended, including direct seeding or cultivation in a nursery-style situation. If direct seeding, at least five seeds should be planted and kept moist with irrigation for the first year. In the nursery, seeds can be covered with potting mix and kept dark and damp or pretreated with a broad spectrum biocide before placing them in a zip-top plastic bag filled with moistened vermiculite. Bags should be stored at a constant temperature of 17-22 °C and germination may occur as early

as two weeks, but may continue for up to nine months. After germination, the seedlings can be transferred into pots with a nitrogen-fixing host plant such as wattle or sheoak until they are large enough for transplanting. Best results have occurred when planting is undertaken in early spring.

Quandong is able to re-shoot from rootstock after fire, but regrowth is slow, and in areas where frequent fires occur, large specimens are rare.

CSIRO Australia began investigating the horticultural potential of Quandongs in 1973 and many studies on the cultivation and commercialisation of Quandong have been done by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation. Concerns over the long-term impact of wild harvesting means that orchard production will continue to increase in importance. For references on commercial Quandong production contact the Editor.

It is important to note that Quandongs should not be collected in the wild without the appropriate Parks and Wildlife collecting licence and/or the permission of the landowner, and you are sure that it is Quandong fruit and not another unknown plant!

Whether grown for its fruit or simply as a decorative native plant, the Quandong would be a talking point in any garden.