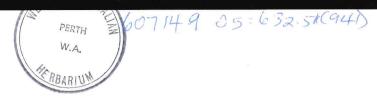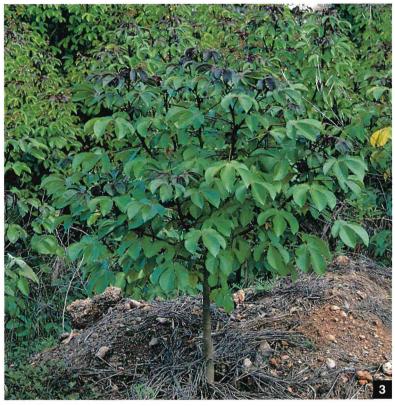# BELLY-ACHE BUSH

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1. Fruit
2. Flowers
3. Mature plant
4. Infestation

Photo 1: Craig Brockway
Other photos: Ron Smith,
Dept. Primary Industries and
Fisheries, NT.

BELLY-ACHE BUSH

What you should know about Belly-ache bush

Belly-ache bush *(Jatropha gossypifolia)* is native of the Caribbean region of tropical America.

It has become a weed in a number of tropical areas of the world, including Australia, where it has been introduced. Belly-ache bush occurs across northern Australia, but never in the south. It is naturalised in Queensland, particularly along the Burdekin river, where it has taken over extensive areas of river frontage. Infestations can range from isolated bushes and small clumps, to infestations covering many hectares.

In WA it is found in parts of the Kimberley region.

It appears to be spreading slowly in all northern states, and seems to be associated with pressures of over-stocking, less frequent use of fire as a pasture management tool and the availability of disturbed sites around towns.

Belly-ache bush may have been deliberately introduced into Australia late last century for medicinal or ornamental purposes. It has been used for medicinal purposes in Africa and Thailand. It is said to be a tumour inhibitor, purgative and emetic. Oil extracted from seeds has been used as a source of lighting fuel in Timor. Its only other known use is an ornamental plant.

Belly-ache bush is a declared plant in the Derby / West Kimberley and Broome shires, (categories P I, P3). It may not be introduced and any plants in the shires must be destroyed.

Why Belly-ache bush matters to you

Undesirable characteristics of belly-ache bush include:

- Fruits (seeds) are toxic to humans and stock. The toxic substance is toxalbumin, which causes gastro-enteritis when eaten
- Usually unpalatable to stock
- Competes with and displaces pastures and native vegetation
- Obscures fence lines
- Hinders mustering

Since its introduction to the Northern Territory belly-ache bush has become an invasive weed of grazing land and along waterways. Dense thickets on some pastoral land make that land unsuitable for grazing.

What you should look for

- Belly-ache bush is a squat, thick stemmed shrub normally 1.5 but sometimes as tall as 3 metres tall.
- Leaves are divided into three broad, rounded lobes.
- Damaged stems exude a watery sap.
- Leaf stalk and lobes are covered with coarse, sticky brown hairs.
- Young leaves have a purple colouration, while old leaves are a dark green colour.
- Small purple flowers with yellow centres, occur in clusters.

Why Belly-ache bush might succeed in WA

Belly-ache bush already occurs in WA. There are small and scattered infestation around many townsites in the Kimberley.

Belly-ache bush is well adapted to a range of soil types. It grows readily on pindan and black soils and on the edges of salt marshes.

Overgrazed and disturbed areas (roadsides, townsites), and watercourses are particularly prone to its invasion.

A 1.5 metre tall plant can produce over fifty seed pods a month. Each pod contain three or four seeds. Seeds germinate and growth occurs at any time when moisture is sufficient. Plants normally start to flower about two years of age. Seed dispersal is particularly effective down watercourses. Other means of spread include vehicles, machinery, stock and birdlife.

Belly-ache bush is a particularly resilient, long lived plant, able to survive extended periods without rain. Leaves are often dropped in dry conditions to conserve moisture.

Evidence of this is the persistence of infestations around abandoned gardens and communities.

What you can do about it

If you find a plant which might be belly-ache bush in the Kimberley, check it out at the nearest Agriculture Protection Board office.

Where to find out more

For further information on belly-ache bush contact the Agriculture Protection Board, Baron-Hay Court, South Perth 6151. Telephone (09) 368 3472 or the nearest country office of the APB or the Department of Agriculture.