

Big Scrub Rainforest Plants for Home Gardens on Alstonville Plateau

Susan Fitzpatrick, September 2020
Gardens

Lismore Rainforest Botanic
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Big Scrub Sub-tropical Rainforest

Forty million years ago, when Australia broke away from the southern super-continent of Gondwana, it was largely covered in rainforest. As it drifted north, the climate dried and the rainforest contracted. By about 1750, it is estimated the distribution of Sub-tropical rainforest had contracted to 200,000 ha in NE NSW and SE Qld. The largest contiguous area of this was the Big Scrub rainforest covering 75,000ha, from the Mt Warning caldera and foothills of the Nightcap Range to Byron Bay, Ballina, Meershaum Vale, Alstonville Plateau and Lismore. For thousands of years the local Aborigines lived in, on and around the Big Scrub, which was and continues to be a place of spiritual significance.

In the 30 years following European settlement in the mid 1800s, 99% of the Big Scrub was cleared. All that remained was 80 mainly small patches of remnant rainforest with a total area of less than 750ha. The remaining remnants are small isolated samples of the original forest. Victoria Park is one of these remnants – it has fortunately been preserved and expanded by landcare groups. Unfortunately, these small remnants lack the plant population size and genetic diversity to be self-sustaining in the longer term. Research into the remnant Big Scrub rainforest stands has provided in-sight into ‘site-suited’ species adapted to an area, topographical positions and microclimate. Thus revealing something of the mosaic of plant species and floristic alliances that were represented in the Big Scrub. Big Scrub Landcare, formed in 1993, has assisted property owners in preserving and expanding rainforest remnants, removing weed species and re-vegetating properties to establish new and connecting stands of rainforest. To date, from 1% remnant Big Scrub rainforest remnants there is now approximately 3-5% reforested Big Scrub sub-tropical rainforest and growing.

Lismore Rainforest Botanic Gardens



In the process of researching appropriate local rainforest trees for our property, I also came across the Lismore Rainforest Botanic Gardens. In 2014 I subsequently decided to volunteer on the basis of increasing my knowledge of native plants and to contribute to an important community asset. I believe I am achieving both aims.

The idea for the Lismore Rainforest Botanic Gardens was considered in the mid-1980s. A steering committee was formed in the early 1990s, and much investigation for a suitable site followed. In 1997 Lismore City Council offered an area to the north of the Waste Management Facility on Wyrallah Road - at no cost! Whilst not ideal in many aspects, it was a 100-acre area, close to Lismore, accessible by road, had access to water and electricity, and it was free! The offer was accepted. Then began the hard work by a dedicated group of ‘Friends’. These Gardens are still very young, the first trees having been planted in 2002, and officially opened in 2013. The initial ‘waste-land’ has been and continues to be transformed into a place of beauty.

The main focus is rainforest trees and other plant species native to an area within 200km of Lismore. So far there are over 500 different species of local rainforest plants, and there are

more to come as rarer plants are found. The Gardens provide a place for recreation, education, propagation, research, heritage, as well as a gene pool for rainforest plants of this region. If you haven't been there already, it is worth a visit and a wander through the many garden rooms, such as the Dry and Sub-tropical Rainforests, Useful Plants, the Sunny slope, Wilson Park garden, Hoop Pine forest, Eucalypt forest, Uncommon plants, Sensory garden, Palm Gully, as well you might see Koalas and a wide variety of birds.

Sub-tropical Rainforest & Native Associate Plants for Home Gardens

Growing local native plants and trees in a suburban garden is very appealing and is important to the biodiversity of the region. Big Scrub Rainforest trees are truly beautiful with their great majesty, mixture of leaf size and texture, of shades of colour, variety and shape. Although many rainforest trees grow very tall or have canopy and buttresses that cover wide areas, there are some that are in fact quite small or can be pruned to fit comfortably in the smaller home garden and make beautiful displays there. By growing some of the rarer rainforest plants you can help with their survival and support a wide diversity of wildlife in your garden, eg butterflies, other insects, nectar loving birds.

Not all rainforest plants are huge trees. There are many small trees, edge of forest and understory shrubs, vines and groundcovers that are truly beautiful and grow well in this area. Here on the Plateau the rainforest is a mixture of dry and sub-tropical rainforest and therefore plants can withstand some longer dry periods and are efficient in use of water.

These plants, once established, will usually grow easily and without need of a lot of attention, enhancing your garden, and help to re-establish a healthy microclimate. Many produce beautiful flowers and the fruit of quite a few is edible.

Some of the larger rainforest trees can be grown in pots. Black Bean (*Castanospermum australe*) is one that is very attractive when young and takes several years to achieve any size. The Riberry Lily pilly (*Syzygium luemanni*) and some figs do well in pots, just to name a few. However, when they do outgrow their pots, donate them to a friend with a larger property ... don't be tempted to plant in a small yard!

Some smaller stunning trees for home gardens include the Narrow-leaved gardenia, Small Bolwarra, Purple pea, Blue tongue, Native Elderberry, Cascade Lily Pilly, Wax Flower. And, some slightly larger trees include the Common Achronychia, Lace flower, Veiny Lace flower, Lemon Myrtle, Ivory Curl, Velvet Leaf, Glossy Laurel, Green Kamala, Wing-leaved Tuckeroo, and a variety of Grevilleas.

Feature trees for larger areas include the Pink Ash, Twin-leaved Coogera, Weeping Bottlebrush, Blackbean, Silky Oak, Native Frangipani, Sweet Pittosporum, Steelwood, Red Lily Pilly, Tulipwood, Flame Tree, Firewheel Tree. There is also a number of local orchids to select from – Christmas, Scented, White Feather, Pink Rock, Rock. As well as numerous ground covers, vines, ferns and shade tolerant plants.

And, if you're into edible rainforest plants, you might consider the Davidson's plum, Midgenbery, Lemon Myrtle, Brush Cherry, Riberry and Finger Lime.

Of course, in choosing your plants and trees always :

REMEMBER - Plant Origin – Size – Aspect - Ambience