



Bush Tucker Unearthed

For thousands of years the Aborigines of Fraser Island survived by taking fish, turtles, dugongs and crabs from the sea and by knowing which of the island's plants were edible and when they were in season.

This *bush tucker* knowledge has been passed down through each successive generation and we are fortunate today that some of this knowledge still remains. There are hundreds of different species of plants on Fraser Island and following is some information on a number of edible, though not necessarily tasty, plants or parts of plants that can be found.

All plant material in the National Park is protected, so look but do not pick. Always be careful sampling bush tucker as many plants contain harmful toxins. If in any doubt about a plant do not eat it.

Geebung (*Persoonia virgata*) is a small tree or shrub with edible fruits 7-20mm long. Ripe fruits are found on the ground under the geebung. The fruits are pale green with a large seed inside and a stalk-like style at the tip. While the fruit is on the tree it is not worth eating.

The sweet pulp of the fruit has a taste similar to watermelon and was a popular food source for the Butchulla. The Brisbane suburb of Geebung was named after this plant.

Hop bush (*Dodonea triquetra*), an under storey shrub, is one of 60 species of hop bush in Australia and produces bitter tasting fruits that look like hops. The pods have three flattened wings extending from a central core. The early European settlers used the fruits to prepare beer of reputable quality. Aborigines chewed the leaves to relieve toothache and applied them to stings, which suggests a pain killing effect.

Blueberry ash (*Elaeocarpus reticulatus*). The small fruits of this shrub, 5mm in diameter, contain a large seed. When the seed is firm it is astringent and unpleasant to eat; as the seed softens the fruit develops a floury taste.

The most flavoursome fruits are wrinkled and hang from the underside of the tree limbs. If the fruit is bright blue it can be eaten raw. This plant can be found in abundance. The best time to look for fruit is between May and October.

Prickly broom heath (*Monotoca sp. Fraser Island*). This heath has hard, prickly leaves and small fruits 2-3mm wide, which ripen during summer and autumn but can be found on some bushes all year round. This bush is generally found growing on sandy unfertile soils. White fruits are edible raw and unripe, green fruits should be avoided.

Macrozamia (*Macrozamia douglasii*). This ancient, deep green trunk-less plant produces pineapple-like cones, 10 to 60 cm long, found at the base of the fronds. The seed of this plant is poisonous and should never be eaten raw.



Aborigines processed the seed by labour intensive methods of cracking, soaking, grinding and then baking it into a type of bread. The seeds are high in starch and were a staple food for the island's Aboriginal people. They were often stored underground for later use.

Bungwall fern (*Blechnum indicum*) is a tall coarse fern that is found in water-logged areas and swamps. It can grow to two metres high in wet environments. Around the resort it commonly grows to approximately one metre tall. This fern was a staple food for the Aborigines and can be found in abundance. The rhizome (a thick root like structure) is pure white and high in starch and can be eaten raw after it has been cleaned. The Aborigines would often dry the rhizome in the sun, roast it, bruise it and then eat it.

Bracken fern (*Pteridium esculentum*). The fronds of this very common fern are green, glossy and hard. The rhizomes contain slimy white starch which turns yellowish in dry conditions.

The rhizomes can be eaten raw or cooked. They are fibrous and gritty with only a small layer of slimy, tasteless starch.

Blady grass (*Imperata cylindrica*) grows to about one metre tall and the leaves have finely serrated margins. It grows profusely as a ground cover in a variety of habitats especially areas that are burned frequently. Blady grass is closely related to sugarcane - the stem is rich in sugar and can be nibbled and sucked for the sugary juice which is sweetest during the wet season. The leaves are pulled from the base and the bottom end chewed.

Mat rush (*Lomandra* spp.). The strap-like leaves of the mat rush are about 1cm wide and they are edible. Each leaf can be pulled from the underground base of the plant and the white section can be eaten. The flavour is similar to that of raw green peas.

Fraser Island Aborigines also ate the small, spiny flowers.

Flax lilies (*Dianella* spp.) look much like grasses because of their long thin leaves. All species have bluish berries and grow in a variety of habitats. Flax lilies have been used for a variety of purposes including weaving dillies and baskets.

The berries of all the species, except for a few Tasmanian species, can be eaten and the base of the leaves of the plants found around the resort can also be eaten.

Grass trees (*Xanthorrhoea* spp.) are easily identified by their long, thin leaves and masses of small, pale flowers coming from a singular, long, woody, vertical extension. The main part of this plant used for food was its starchy core. This core found at the base of the leaves, is tender and can be eaten raw or roasted. By pulling out the leaves you can also sample the astringent flavour at their base.



When the plant was in flower Aborigines used to lick the sweet nectar from the flowers or dip them into water to make a refreshing drink. The Aborigines also used the resin from the trunk of the trees as glue for use on axe heads.

Pigface (*Carpobrotus glaucescens*). This unmistakable plant has very fleshy leaves and bright pink flowers and can be found growing on foredunes close to the beach. The tasty fruit turns a deep red or purple when ripe.

With a taste like salty strawberries this fruit was highly sought after by Aboriginal people - the edible portion is squeezed from the casing of the fruit. The leaves can also be eaten but have a revolting taste. Juice from these leaves has been used to take the sting out of midge bites.

Beach bean (*Canavalia rosea*) is a common creeper found on beach foredunes. It yields seed pods of 8-14 cm long. Beach beans are one of the few Australian native beans which are edible. They are poisonous when eaten raw but if cooked for 15 minutes both the beans and the pod can be eaten - this is a very tasty bush food though rarely used by Butchulla people.

Grey mangrove (*Avicennia marina*) is easily identified by its peg roots or pneumatophores, and it is generally the mangrove species closest to the salt water. Grey mangrove seeds are large and fleshy and their flesh is toxic and must be treated before it is eaten. Aborigines baked the seed and then soaked it in water, before eating the avocado tasting seed.

Orange Mangrove (*Bruguiera gymnorhiza*) produces cigar shaped fruits that float vertically in the water. The seed was baked, pounded, rinsed several times in water, and then the excess water was squeezed from the pulp before it was eaten.

Banksias (*Banksia spp.*) Banksias are woody shrubs or trees with characteristically large, coarse and "bottle brush" blossoms. Flower colours may be yellow, green, brown, mauve, pink or purplish and after they wither a large cone remains with woody follicles containing the winged seeds.

The diet of Aboriginal people was often bland and sugar yielding foods, such as the nectar from the Banksia flower were highly regarded. The sweet beads of nectar were either sucked from the blossom or dipped into water to make a flavoursome *cordial*.

Nectar is best collected early in the morning before it is evaporated by the sun or diminished by the birds.

Screw pine (*Pandanus spp.*) Pandanus palms are coastal trees and are not members of the pine or palm families. The leaves of the pandanus are long and tapered with fiercely serrated edges. The large compound fruits of the pandanus are a yellow orange or reddish brown and the hard orange wedges, 5 - 10 cm long, fall to the ground when ripe.



Each woody wedge contains a few slender seeds which have a delicious nutty taste and can be eaten cooked and are very high in fats and proteins. When eaten raw the seeds can cause swelling of the tongue and lips and violent diarrhoea. The inner bases of young leaves are also edible and are thought to cure diarrhoea. The pulp from the wedges was also used to make an alcoholic drink.