



The Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW)

(Founding in 1940 as the Parrot & African Lovebird Society of Australia)

Bunya Pine (Nuts) (*Araucaria bidwillii*)

(Bird) Plant of the Month March 2012

(ASNSW Meeting - August 2012)

By Graeme Phipps

This is the first of a new segment for the meetings of the Avicultural Society of New South Wales (ASNSW), "Plant of the Month", but really BIRD plant of the month, because the plant needs to relate to birds in some way - whether by food, enrichment, nesting, etc.

Background

Bunya Pines are one of only two species of Araucarias native to Australia, the [Hoop Pine *A. cunninghamii*](#) being the other. Although called 'pines', they aren't really, but there is no other common name for them. Eighteen species exist globally, of which, maybe the [Norfolk Island Pine *A. heterophylla*](#), is the one we know best. [New Caledonia](#) has the most species. [Araucarias](#) are [Gondwana](#) plants relating to when the southern continents were all joined together and were common in the age of dinosaurs; but are just relics now of course. Bunya Pines are native to southeast Queensland.

Details

Specimen trees of Bunya Pines are growing in the grounds of Richmond College of TAFE and the adjacent University of Western Sydney, Hawkesbury. The university hosts a large population of corellas which roost there. I noticed four [Slender-billed Corellas *Cacatua tenuirostris*](#) feeding on the nuts of the Bunya Pine. These could be a great food source and also enrichment for captive cockatoos. Cones exhibited at the club should be trialled by people keeping cockatoos to see how they go.

The Bunya Pine tree in question is fairly small - possibly 4-5 metres, and hence produces 'smallish' cones of about 2kg each. Bunya Pines can grow to 40 metres and produce much larger cones. Female Bunya Pines drop the cones which hit the ground and may smash into 80-100 nuts which are about 3-4cm across, so are fairly large. It is said that the cones are dangerous because you wouldn't want one dropping on your head, however I haven't heard of anyone being killed by one. That would be super bad luck, or, maybe your card was up. They crop in January-February.



Bunya Pine (*Araucaria bidwillii*)
File courtesy [Wikipedia](#)



Bunya Cone (*Araucaria bidwillii*)
File courtesy [Wikipedia](#)

It is interesting to reflect on how the Bunya Pine disperses its seeds given this. I suppose some Jurassic dinosaurs might have been involved. But what would move them around now - seed-eating mammals like rats, or maybe cockatoos are it. Clearly the tree needs SOME of the seeds to make it and be spread elsewhere.

The nuts containing the seed are large. [Wikipedia](#) reports the nutritional composition of the kernel to be 40% water, 40% complex carbohydrates, 9% proteins, 2% fats, 0.2% potassium and 0.06% magnesium.

They are edible. I have eaten them myself and like them (see cooking and prep tips below). Bunya nuts were an important food for Aboriginal people.

Cooking and shelling bunya nuts

from <http://www.ozpolitic.com/gardening/trees/bunya.html#cooking-shelling>

The main difficulty with bunya nuts is removing the inner cream coloured shell. I use three main methods for shelling and cooking bunya nuts.

The first involves boiling the nuts for half an hour or so on the stove, or cooking them in the microwave for a shorter period. Do not put Bunya nuts in the microwave by themselves, as they will explode. The microwave method is quicker, probably uses less energy and can be used with smaller quantities of nuts. Once you have boiled the nuts, use a pair of needle nose pliers to remove the shell. It is easiest if you use a set with a thin nose, as you have to jam one of the jaws into the pointy end of the nut. Once you've done that, grip onto the end of the shell and pull it off the nut. You can also rotate the pliers to roll up the shell, like those old sardine cans. The nuts can then be eaten as is, or used in cooking. It doesn't seem to harm the eating quality if you cook them twice.

Another method is to put a nut onto a block of wood and chop it in half with a machete. A meat cleaver or tomahawk may be a suitable substitute. You need to do a clean cut all or most of the way through the nut. Obviously, do not attempt to hold the nut while chopping it and keep your free hand well away. (Kids, ask your parents to do this bit for you.) This method is a lot easier, and cleaner too because you do the shelling outside and skip the boiling. I use a deeply serrated steak knife to get the two halves of the nut out of the shell. I usually do four nuts at a time to speed the process up, then count the eight shell halves as I find them spread over the lawn. The nuts still have to be cooked.

This method may not be suitable if you are using them in a quick stir fry. If this is the case, try chopping them into smaller pieces and adding them at the start of the cooking. In fact, you should add them at the start no matter what you are cooking them with.

By far the easiest method is to cook them in a fire on a BBQ grill over a high flame. Fresh Bunya nuts will split open or even explode. You may want to wear eye protection when doing this and or cover them with a pot or something. The nuts will be slightly burned in places.

For eating the nuts by themselves, this gives the best flavour.

Bunya nuts can be frozen, but they may not pop open as nicely on a fire if they aren't fresh.

If you keep them too long, especially inside the cone, they will sprout. The sprouts are edible and I treat them the same way as the nuts. Bunya nuts can be blended with honey to make a nice spread for sandwiches and toast. They are a cheap substitute for pine nuts in pesto (see recipe in basil article). They can be eaten raw when fresh, but are much better cooked. I have heard anecdotal evidence of people getting sick from raw nuts, but I don't know how fresh they were.

Tips on Bunya Nuts

from <http://www.daleysfruit.com.au/bushfood/bunya.htm>

THREE YEARLY LARGE CROP: Generally there is a large crop / bumper crop every three years and then a few cones annually. Soaking the shelled nuts in water for more than 12 hours removes the enzyme inhibiting factor for better digestion. | R O L F - Bankstown, Sydney, NSW 24-Oct-2006.

Steamed (in the shell) Bunya Nuts - delicious native food. Bankstown and all Sydney has many Bunya Trees fruiting. | Rolf - Bankstown, NSW 26-Mar-2006.

I found the best way to cook Bunya nuts is to roast them in the hot coals of a small camp fire and they're ready when they go pop. I found the easiest way to extract the nut is to cut the "fat" end of the seed off and lever it out with the tip of a knife. | Bradley Sargent - Starthnerton, VIC 31-Mar-2009.

We guillotine them in half in the shell then pry them out and then put them in the freezer for later use. | Anne Tinworth - Nambour, QLD 03-Aug-2010.

We grew up on Bunya nuts in Queensland but my children and husband hate them - say they taste like cardboard - my sisters and I love them and boil them up in the salty water from corn beef and enjoy every morsel. | Julie Bow - Brisbane, QLD 27-Feb-2011.

PS I forgot to mention - we cut the nuts length ways in half after cooking and take out the core which mum always told us was poison. | Julie Bow - Brisbane, QLD 27-Feb-2011.

We have four trees @ 40 mtrs high planted circa 1880s (120 yrs old). They drop cones every year with the largest exceeding 18kg. Last year many of the trees in our area were de-coned by arborists for safety, but we have a second flush of cones falling now | Burns Road - Wahroonga, Sydney, NSW 12-Feb-2007.

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