

How to collect seed.

Notes from Crows Nest Community Nursery, 2026.

Growing the Native Plants of the Toowoomba Region

THE BASICS:

1. **Collect from wild plants where possible**, to ensure having the local native variety. This is likely to be more frost and drought resistant than plants of the same species from commercial nurseries, which often come from coastal stock.
2. **Collections from isolated plants may fail** because seed may not be fertilised. Collecting from plants which have several of the same species close by is better, (but if the isolated plant is all you have, we'll give it a try!)
3. **Collect from a number of parent plants if possible**, to increase genetic diversity
4. Be aware of your responsibility to **leave enough seed behind for nature's purposes**. Collect no more than 10%. "Nature's purposes" include seed for regeneration, and food for many species of wildlife.
5. Always **write down** (1) name of plant if known, (2) when and (3) where collected, (4) name of collector, and (5) was the plant naturally occurring or cultivated. Keep this note with each lot of seed collected.
6. **Consider the "mother soil" trick**. Some plants grow better if certain species of fungus are present in the soil. Planting them with a bit of mother soil from around the parent tree can boost seedling health. If you have prior knowledge that a certain plant is known to germinate well but fails to thrive, collect a small amount of mother soil when collecting the seed. Store for use in a sealed, labelled, plastic bag in fridge. Sprinkle a pinch or two on seed raising medium when planting the seed. Plants which may perform better with mother soil include: *Sophora fraseri*, *Pittosporum angustifolium*, *Capparis species*, and parasitic plants (such as *Exocarpos*, *Santalum*, *Chorizema*).

WHEN TO COLLECT

- **Seeds in woody or dry capsules and pods:** Collect when the first few capsules begin to open, or when the stems of the pods have matured to the point of being obviously brown and dry. (Jacksonias are an exception. Collect when pods are green, but seeds inside are ripe.)
- Gumtree capsules usually ripen on tree when it begins to produce bud for the next flowering. *Banksia integrifolia* (Tree Banksia) and capsules open on tree in autumn, soon after ripening. Many wattles ripen in early summer. Other Banksias and Hakeas may remain closed for years, only opening if picked from plant and kept dry. Casuarinas and *Allocasuarina leuhmanii* (Bull-oak) ripen and open to shed their seeds in autumn, so there is only a narrow window of time before opening. Other Allocasuarinas retain their seeds on tree in unopened capsules for a long time, so can be collected over a long period.
- **Fleshy fruits. Collect** when soft. They should look and feel like something a bird would want to eat.
- **Bright bird-attracting capsules.** (e.g. some *Pittosporums*). These are often yellow or orange, and open up to show bright interior - orange or red - sometimes with shiny black seeds. Collect when capsules open.
- **Capsules and pods that explode**, scattering seed (e.g. Croton, Baloghia, rattlepods). Collect ripe-looking unopened capsules/pods when the first few on the plant have opened. Store in a paper bag to catch seed as it explodes. Some of these seeds lose viability quickly, so try to plant soon after collecting.

Collect it **when you see it**. Plants of inland Australia are highly variable in their seeding times, so finding the seed you want can be difficult. Planned excursions for the purpose of seed-collecting may fail to find anything, while people engaged in other outdoor activities often stumble across perfect, ripe seed.

Don't waste an opportunity!

SEED MANAGEMENT AFTER COLLECTING

A. Some seeds need to be kept dry.

These are the seeds that get shed from woody or dry pods or capsules, like gumtrees, wattles, melaleucas, leptospermum, grevillea, banksias, lomandras, hoveas and she-oaks.

- Put freshly collected seeds into a paper bag or open container, so they dry out and don't go mouldy.
- If capsules/pods haven't opened yet, keep in a warm place like a sunny windowsill, or the car dashboard until they do.
- Store in a paper bag in a dry fridge. If this is not available, keep safe from vermin by storing in a cool place in a paper bag inside a sealed plastic container.
- These seeds are usually, (though not always) long-keeping, and therefore **suitable for keeping in a seed bank.**

2. Some seeds must not be allowed to dry out.

These are seeds with fleshy fruit, such as lillypillies and other rainforest fruits, saltbush, and dianella. Drying out may kill them.

- Some of these fruits are likely to have invisible insect infestation in the form of caterpillars inside the fruits. Soak ASAP in luke-warm water with a touch of detergent, for a few hours or overnight. Either plant at once (after squeezing seeds out of the flesh, if this is easy to do), or dry the fruits lightly on a paper towel, and keep in a sealed plastic bag (to prevent drying out) in the fridge (to prevent mould) until you can get them to the nursery.
- Even when well cared-for, these seeds may have only a very short life-span, so should be planted as soon as possible. In some cases, the viability period can be as little as a few days. Try not to delay in getting them to the nursery.
- These seeds are usually, (though not always) short-lived, and therefore are **NOT suitable for keeping in a seed bank.**

3. Some special cases

- **Figs.** Best planted from fresh fruit. Collect from tree when soft, or from ground while they still look like something a bird would want to eat. Smear this soft fruit out thinly on a paper towel, trying to make a single layer of seeds. Allow to dry for an hour or two only. Remove seed mass from paper as much as possible, and crumble. Store in a paper bag in the fridge, where it may remain viable for a few years.
- **Boonarees and birds-eyes** *Alectryon*, **tuckeroos** *Cupaniopsis* and **white beetroot tree** *Elattostachys*. Very prone to being stung by bugs while still in the unopened capsule, and even more so on the ground. Collect from tree only, choosing ripe-looking capsules when the first few show signs of opening. Keep in a paper bag or open container while they open. Plant ASAP.
- **Daisies.** (Including *Austral cornflower*, *rice flower*, *cough bush*) Collect the little seeds when the centre of the daisies goes fluffy. Separate off fluff if possible, otherwise just put the lot into a paper bag and allow to dry. Very prone to insect attack, so put treat to kill the bugs. Store in fridge. Viability usually less than a year, but may be better if stored until the coming spring.
- **Soap Ash** *Alphitonia excelsa*. Collect when black fruits begin to open to show red seeds. Almost-ripe fruits can be collected and left in hot sun till they open. Best results from young trees. Collect a large quantity, as many do not germinate.
- **Piccabeen Palm** *Archontophoenix cunninghamiana*. Collect best red fruit from a damp place with a little mother soil. Keep damp in a plastic bag in fridge until ready to plant. Plant ASAP.
- **Brachychitons.** (Kurrajongs, bottle trees, flame trees, lacebarks). Where possible, collect from wild plants, away from suburbs and gardens, so as to get seed that has not cross-pollinated with other species or cultivars. Remove seeds from pods ASAP (using gloves, to protect yourself from the itchy hairs). Put seeds in bucket, rub thoroughly to separate seed from husks. Tip from container to container in a breeze, to winnow away the husks. Check seed for grubs, and add a small amount of derris dust if it seems necessary. Cleaned, dry, insect-free seed, keeps well for some years.
- **She-oak and Cypress.** Collect capsules only, NOT THE BRANCHLETS. (Dried branchlets break up, as the seed capsules open to shed seeds. Left together for a while, it becomes almost impossible to sort out the seed from the twiggy rubbish.)
- **Neolitsea, Guioa.** Fruits ripen sequentially. Branches with some ripe seed can be collected and kept in water till all are ripe.

- **Under-tree ripeners.** (Geijera, Owenia, Elaeodendron, Vitex, Gmelina, Siphonodon). These seeds may need to mature for years before they are ready to grow. The best collection method requires a large container. Collect lots of mulch from under the tree with new and old seeds in it. Keep it dry until it can be delivered to the nursery. Alternatively, water this mulch well in spring, and prick out the seedlings when their roots are still under 5cm long, keep damp for delivery to nursery.

DON'T LET SEED DIE AFTER COLLECTING.

Seed which was perfectly good when picked can die before planting, from:

- **mould.** Dry seed types should be carefully dried out before storing. Beware storing in plastic.
- **drying out.** Fleshy fruits may die from drying out. Keep sealed in plastic bags in fridge, so they neither dry out nor go mouldy.
- **being left too long before planting.** Some seeds are only viable for a few days, many for only a few months. Others keep for many years. When in doubt, get the seed planted ASAP. (Keeping seed at 4°C - the usual temperature in the bottom of a typical fridge - prolongs its life.)
- **being eaten by insects collected with the seed.** (Inspect for tiny holes)
 1. Seed should be "cleaned" (i.e. separated from capsules, pods, leaves and other plant matter which may conceal insects), as soon as possible. Clean seed is safer!
 2. Spraying in paper seed bag with "surface spray" insect killer, or adding a shake of derris dust may kill an infestation.
 3. Some seed (frost hardy species only) can be put in freezer for half an hour to kill insects.
 4. Fleshy fruits can be soaked in lukewarm water with detergent for an hour to kill grubs. Then either plant at once, or dry well with paper towel, and refrigerate until they can be planted.
- **being found by insects, mice etc,** after you have collected it. Store seed in a protected place.

GETTING SEED TO CROWS NEST COMMUNITY NURSERY (CNCN).

Seed can be delivered CNCN on Thursdays, or to the Council Nursery at Charlton. Alternatively, seed can be delivered to staff or a volunteer in Toowoomba. Ring TRC on 131 872 and ask for the manager, Crows Nest Community Nursery, to make an arrangement if you want to deliver seed anywhere except CNCN.

GETTING PLANTS IDENTIFIED

Crows Nest Community Nursery can only use seed if the plant species is known, but **don't walk past some good seed, because you don't know what it is!** If you are unable to identify the plant:

- **Collect specimen** of small branch with mature leaves, branch tip and any flowers, seed capsules, or fruits.
- **Keep it fresh:** put the specimen in a plastic bag, Add a few drops of water (or breathe in it) to humidify the air if the weather is dry, and seal well. Store in bottom of fridge until it can be shown to someone who might help identify the plant. (e.g. Crows Nest Nursery staff)
- **Alternatively, 2 or 3 photos of the plant,** including the seeds, and any flowers, fruit or capsules, can be emailed to the nursery manager via TRC. Show both sides of leaves, and how leaves typically join to the stem. Include a hand or finger in one of the photos, for scale. Show the whole plant if possible, in one of the photos. Provide any other information which might be useful, such as whether the crushed leaves have a distinctive smell, whether a broken-off leaf bleeds white sap from the stem (if so keep away from your skin and eyes!) what the opened seed capsule or fruit cut in half looks like, whether the plant is a shrub, tree, climber, etc. For phone photos, placing a plant part on your hand helps get good focus.

THE SEED BANK FALLACY

Much good seed is lost because it is "banked" when it would have been better to plant it at once.

THE RULE OF THUMB is that dry types of seed keep well, and fleshy types don't.

When in doubt, assume it might be important to get the seed to the nursery quickly, in case it is a short-lived seed type that should be planted before it dies. (But better late than never! Older seed might work)

For species with short-lived seed, the best method of preserving it for future planting is to grow it yourself, in a place where fresh seed can be collected from it for nursery use each year.

Collecting and conserving seed makes a lasting contribution to the Environment of the Future.

Thank You for Your Help