Plant of the Month - May

by Allan Carr

Melaleuca quinquenervia   **Broad-leaved Paperbark**

Pronunciation: mel-a-LEW-ka   quin-ken-ERV-ee-a   MYRTACEAE

Derivation: *Melaleuca*, from the Greek, *melas* – black and *leukos* – white, referring to black fire scars on white trunks; ***quinquenervia***, from the Latin, *quinque* – five and *nervus* – veins or nerves, a reference to the five veins visible on the leaf blade.

Habit   Flowers, leaves   Bark

This tree is found on the east coast of Queensland and New South Wales from Cape York to Botany Bay usually along watercourses and seasonally inundated areas. It also occurs in New Guinea and New Caledonia. There are approximately 240 species of Melaleuca, 235 of which are native to Australia.

Description: *M. quinquenervia* is a broad-leaved paperbark, often the most conspicuous plant of swampy areas and is usually a small tree of 12 to 14 metres but can reach up to 25 metres. The white bark is *persistent and develops a multi-layered papery habit.

Leaves are alternate, flat, leathery and grey-green with a small point at the tip and aromatic when crushed. They can be up to 120 mm x 25 mm with 5 distinctive longitudinal veins.

Flowers appear as short bottlebrush spikes, cream or white in colour and up to 50 mm long, all year round but mainly in April to July.

Fruits are woody capsules to 5 mm arranged cylindrically around the stems and containing hundreds of fine seeds.

The bark was used by Aboriginal people for building shelters and wrapping food for cooking. The nectar-rich blossoms were soaked in water to make a sweet drink. Leaves were boiled to make infusions to treat coughs, colds, headache and general sickness by inhaling the vapour.

The flowers provide nectar for lorikeets, friarbirds and honeyeaters and are eaten by grey-headed and little red flying foxes as well as lorikeets and little corellas. They also attract many different insects and some adult butterflies. The leaves are eaten by Koalas though are not their favourite food.

*persistent = not shed readily