

## ***Eucalyptus exserta* (Queensland Peppermint)**

Queensland Peppermint is a tree with a wide distribution almost wholly within its State of Origin, Queensland. It can be found in the coastal belt from Cairns to the New South Wales border and inland as far west as Quilpie, 800 km. from the coast. This adaptability to a range of growing conditions seems to have resulted in considerable variation of habit. While its peak development on fertile soils in the Maryborough/Gympie district is as a 25 m., straight trunked tree, here on the Sunshine Coast it is commonly seen as a much smaller, twisted tree or even a mallee, due to its occurrence growing in skeletal soils on exposed mountain sites such as Cooroora, Cooran and Tinbeerwah.



Forming in summer, the flower buds have conical, relatively long opercula.



This is an indication that *E. exserta* belongs in the *Exsertaria* section of subgenus *Symphyomyrtus*, the Red Gum section of Eucalypts, a large group of about forty five that includes the River Red Gum (*E. camaldulensis*) and, locally, Forest Red Gum (*E. tereticornis*). What's confusing is that, along with a handful of others in the section, it doesn't have the smooth deciduous bark of a gum, rather a rough, fibrous bark persistent on the trunk and larger branches. However, on our local, smaller trees, grey, gum-type bark can be seen peeling from smaller branches or stems in summer to expose the fresh, cream/orange coloured bark below.





The common name Queensland Peppermint is due to the strong peppermint/eucalypt odour released when the leaves are crushed. But, another oddity, it is not a true Peppermint. These trees belong in a small group of ***Eucalyptus*** species occurring almost exclusively in Australia's south east, notable for their "peppermint" bark (persistent and fibrous) and the glands in their leaves that produce the oils giving the characteristic odour described above.

That sounds a lot like "our" Queensland Peppermint, so what gives? It could be that it's an example of convergent evolution. This is the process whereby similar characteristics evolve in unrelated (or in this case, not closely related) species in response to particular conditions. However it comes about, both true Peppermints and Qld. Peppermint are sought-after sources of cineole, the most valuable of the eucalyptus oils due to medicinal, antiseptic and stain removing qualities, so much so that China is by far the World's largest producer of eucalyptus oil distilled from the leaves of their plantation-grown ***Eucalyptus exserta***.



*Eucalyptus exserta* in Reinke Scrub, Proston



What determines where a plant species sits in the taxonomic classification system devised to try to make sense of the complexity of the natural world is, of course, its reproductive characteristics or put simply, what the flowers and fruit look like rather than how the bark and leaves appear. And the fruit of Qld. Peppermint, with its strongly exerted or protruding valves, is quite distinct from that of the southern Peppermints. This is another feature that places *Eucalyptus exserta* in the Red Gum Group, section *Exsertaria* of the subgenus *Symphyomyrtus*.



Possibly due to the plentiful late spring and summer rain, the trees on Mt. Tinbeerwah have flowered particularly well this year. Seeing the numerous buds swelling in January, I took the short drive from Tewantin to the mountain top several times until finally, in early February, getting what I was looking for: the fabulous sight of many *Eucalyptus exserta* in flower silhouetted against blue sky, horizon and sea.

