

Lophostemon confertus (Brush Box)

This article is the twentieth and last in the series on Eucalypts and closely related species. The informal groupings have all been covered I think: the Gums with their smooth, peeling bark; Bloodwoods (*Corymbia spp.*); Stringybarks; Ironbarks; the fibrous barked Mahoganies; Apples (*Angophora spp.*); Half Barks like *Eucalyptus pilularis*; Turpentines (*Syncarpia spp.*); Ashes; Mallees; and Messmates. But there's one category we've yet to look at: the Boxes, so let's finish off with *Lophostemon confertus*, the Brush Box.

Like most of the informal names listed above, the word box is a description of the tree's bark. It's the first and the easiest feature of a tree to observe and these names are an attempt to group species of *Eucalyptus* etc. according to the appearance of the trunk and qualities of the timber. But, being informal, crossovers occur: e.g., *Angophora floribunda* has the common names Apple Box and Rough-barked Apple and *Corymbia tessellaris* is simultaneously an Ash, a Half Bark and a Bloodwood. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the Boxes include Eucalypts like Gum-topped Box (*Eucalyptus mollucana*), Yellow Box (*Eucalyptus melliodora*) and many others. None of these, however, are found locally. Nevertheless, we do have the next best thing, Brush Box and Swamp Box (*Lophostemon suaveolens*), both members of *Myrtaceae*, the same family as the Eucalypts.

Although superficially similar, *Lophostemon spp.* differ from *Eucalyptus*, *Corymbia*, *Angophora* and *Syncarpia spp.* in some fundamental ways. The most obvious is the flowers. Unlike the Eucalypts etc., they have petals, five of them, plus five feathery bundles of stamens all arranged in axillary cymes of seven flowers. *Lophostemon* means "crested stamens" and is a reference to this notable feature.



Lophostemon confertus

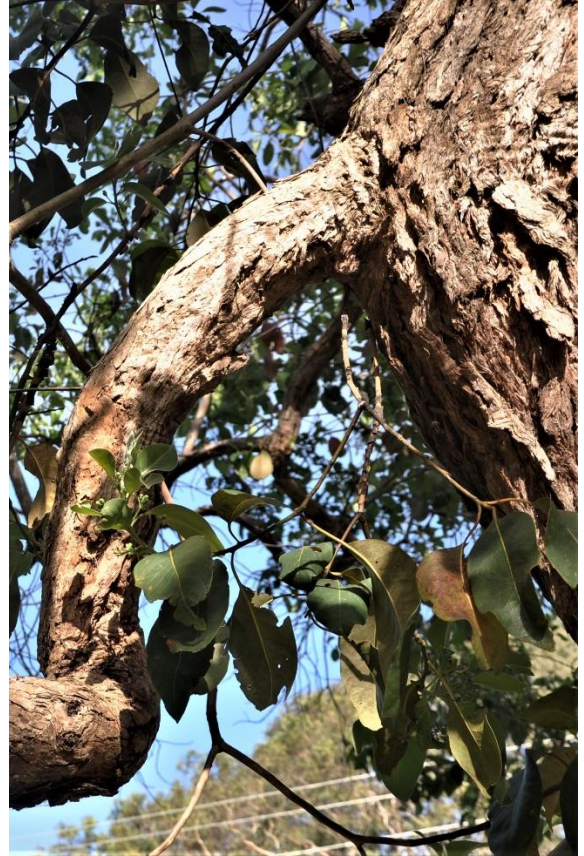


Lophostemon suaveolens

The flower stamens of Swamp Box (*Lophostemon suaveolens*) are less conspicuous, a means of differentiating the two local members of the genus. Another method is to observe their trunks. That of a Brush Box has box bark (i.e., fibrous and scaly) only on its lower parts. The upper trunk and branches shed bark in the manner of a Gum, leaving a pink- to orange- to red-brown surface. The trunk and branches of a Swamp Box have a more twisted shape and the box bark is persistent to the ends of small branches.

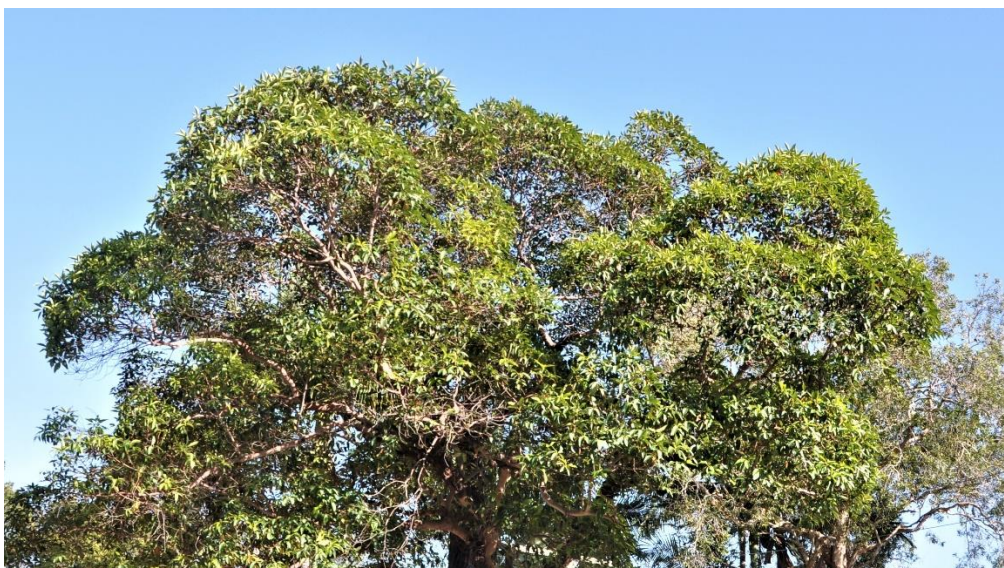


Brush Box



Swamp Box

The leaves are glossy, ovate, alternate and grouped in false whorls of four to five at the very ends of branchlets. This gathering together of leaves is alluded to by the species name *confertus*, Latin for “crowded”. The effect of this on a mature tree is a domed canopy providing good shade, in contrast to the habit of most eucalypts.



The fruit is apparently distinctive in possessing a deciduous placental column but seems similar in appearance to a gum nut to me. It is known to be eaten by Crimson Rosellas and Red-tailed Black Cockatoos.



The tree's main distribution is from Newcastle, N.S.W., to Fraser Island, Queensland but isolated stands do occur further north in many locations including Blackdown Tableland, the Paluma Range and Atherton Tableland. Brush Box is nothing if not adaptable. Dense stands of dwarfed trees inhabit sand dunes on Moreton Island and exposed headlands at Coffs Harbour but peak development is reached in rainforest margins where it can reach heights of 50 metres.

The heartwood is fine-grained, strong, wears well and is an attractive pinkish brown, making for appealing flooring. Its many further applications range from bridge and wharf decking to pulley blocks. It is also useful as a street tree, being hardy, adaptable, disease and pest resistant with a tolerance for smog, and easily managed. However, in Sydney where it lines the streets of whole suburbs, Brush Box has invaded bushland and is now considered a weed.

Taxonomists are often labelled lumpers or splitters. Brush Box was once lumped in with *Tristania spp.* and called *Tristania conferta* but when that genus was revised in 1982, the splitters had their way and we ended up with *Lophostemon*, *Tristaniopsis* and *Tristania spp.* It is also known under the common names Pink Box, Scrub Box, Brisbane Box, Queensland Box and Vinegartree (can't say why). So many names reflect the numerous ways *Lophostemon confertus* deserves to be recognised as one of our premier trees.

Robert M Price, October, 2022