



# Gardening at home in Darwin

## Selecting Trees

Home gardening in Darwin can be most rewarding with rapid results and plenty of scope to meet particular needs.

Trees are especially valuable providing careful selection has taken place and a little research and forethought has been given before planting. Mistakes with tree choices and placement can be very costly indeed!

If starting your garden from scratch it is a good idea to drive around the streets of Darwin and observe the trees that you find most attractive.

It is also a good idea to take a walk through our lovely Botanic Gardens, and visit local nurseries.

A gardening book will help you check out the names of the trees that you find most appealing, ascertain their mature heights and shapes and then read up a little on their requirements. You will soon know which trees are safe to plant near your house, which ones provide year-round shade and privacy, and which ones you may wish to avoid.

When choosing trees for your garden remember that Australian natives encourage birds and help reduce water costs.

Water requirements should be given serious consideration before any planting takes place.

Indeed, water is a precious commodity and we have a big responsibility to use it as wisely as possible—this becomes a very obvious issue during the long months of Darwin's dry season.

## Time and Money

It is also sensible to determine the amount of time and money that you are prepared to give to your garden, especially the pruning of trees over the years to come. If you do not wish to prune at all then you need to make your selection from small trees and shrubs.

## Your Neighbours

It is a good idea to consult with neighbours before planting large trees, particularly near the fenceline. Neighbourly cooperation between garden owners can be mutually beneficial in terms of shade, produce and privacy. When choosing large trees you must consider your neighbours.

## Large Trees

Large trees produce deep shade and while deep shade in Darwin is most welcome be aware that concentrated shade will reduce the ability of many other plants to flower and fruit.

Also think about the resultant tree roots. Roots can invade other properties and cause pool damage for your neighbours and cause all sorts of problems for their pathways. Tree roots can also wreak havoc with your own driveway. The roots of Ficus species, particularly, have a tendency to seek water sources, eg plumbing and sewage systems.

You also need to take a responsible attitude regarding large trees and the possibility of storm damage.

Some large trees common in the Darwin area are *Albizia lebbbeck* (White Siris), *Allosyncarpia ternata*, *Alstonia actinophylla* (NT Milkwood), *Calophyllum inophyllum* (Beauty Leaf), *Canarium australianum*, *Ganophyllum falcatum*, *Maranthes corymbosum* and *Peltophorum pterocarpum*. These trees are excellent as shade providers and provide shelter and homes for many native animals and birds, but available space and individual conditions should be taken into consideration.

## Think about Water Needs

Due to the variety of habitats in the Top End, there is a wide range of native plants from which to choose. Try and select trees from the same or similar habitats either for the whole garden or for sections within the garden. This will allow for areas of low water requirements and maintenance.

Think about a Northern Territory open forest or woodland garden. This concept can be almost maintenance free and survive without water throughout the dry season.

## Seek Advice

Seeking advice before planting can save a lot of heartache. Nursery people, Conservation Commission officers and Darwin City Council parks staff are all able to assist you and provide information and guidance.

## Small Trees

Many home gardeners prefer small trees, palms and shrubs and find them more manageable. Certainly the smaller trees reduce pruning costs and suffer less in high winds. Even if blown down during storms or cyclones the risk of damage or injury to property or persons is obviously reduced with smaller trees.

Speciality gardens making full use of a range of smaller plants can be most attractive. A small tree garden can provide variety, colour and scent, as well as nectar for the birds and fruit for your table. Planning however, is important.

Resist seeing an appealing plant, buying it on impulse and planting without any research or knowledge. It is one thing to have a collection of plants complementing each other, and quite another to have a haphazard collection with no overall plan.

Some of the most attractive small to medium flowering trees that do well in Darwin include *Cassia marginata* and *Cassia nodosa*, *Lagerstromiea speciosa* (Pride of India), *Tabebuia argentea* (Yellow Trumpet Tree) and *Tabebuia pallida*.

## Add Colour

Additional colour can be added with the use of foliage plants, Crotons, Acalypha, Caladiums and shrubs, Russelia, Euphorbias, Mussaendas, Ruellia and many others. Shop around the nurseries, use gardening reference books, chat to friends and do not hesitate to seek assistance.

A palm and cycad garden can also be eye-catching if properly planned to display the various shades of green, the style of the leaves, trunk shapes and colours, as well as the many flowers and fruits.

Cycads and ferns make effective ground-cover plants and colour can be added by planting the sunlit spots with annual flowers in season, or dwarf Ixoras and Caliantra and perennials, including Plumbago, Gerbera, Gailardia and Portulacca.

### Shared Plantings

Shared plantings are also worth contemplating. Maybe your neighbour would be pleased to share the cost and maintenance of fruit trees and vines on the fenceline. Early consultation is well worthwhile and may even lead to small cooperatives where major items such as mowers, mulch chippers and garden tools can be jointly purchased and owned.

### Soil Depth

Trees in any depth of soil are best planted in large holes to allow the development of large and strong root systems. It is important to remember that the combination of strong winds, heavy rain, shallow soil and large trees will almost always result in the loss of trees. If your property has shallow soil it is better to plant small trees, large shrubs, palms or cycads.

When planting large trees in shallow soils it is essential that you go to the expense of digging or having dug, large holes. In Darwin this may even mean having the holes dug by jack hammer backhoe to prevent 'welling' during rain.

It is best to plant small trees or large shrubs, fruit trees, palms and cycads in the areas with shallow soil.

### Trees on Nature Strips

Trees and shrubs planted on nature strips provide shade, beauty, privacy and wind protection. They make more attractive streets, assist in the greening of Darwin, attract birds and help filter dust and pollution.

However, remember that the nature strips in the municipality are under Council control and permission must be obtained from the Council before planting or removing any trees on nature strips.

Council provides an information sheet *Trees on Nature Strips*, and it also produces an excellent brochure to provide planting

guidance.

Suburban streets should be planted with species that are hardy, relatively quick growing and long-lived. There are many species that readily meet these criteria, need watering only during their establishment period and thereafter require very little maintenance.

### Trees to Avoid on Nature Strips

Trees or shrubs that are poisonous, have thorns or spines or develop large/heavy fruit should not be planted on nature strips.

One must also be careful of overhead powerlines in the older suburbs and no tree or shrub should be planted within 9 metres of a street corner.

Council officers are always available to provide free advice on the range of the best plants to choose for nature strips and how to care for existing nature strip trees.

### Planting Lawns

There are a number of grasses that grow well and are relatively easy to maintain in the Darwin climate. In Darwin, however, it is prudent to sow seed so that a good growth is established before the wet season rains can erode soil and young growth.

Planting a new lawn is best undertaken between May and the end of July, but be aware that Bahia grass is slow to establish - at least 28 days. However, before attempting to plant any grass give due consideration to the maintenance required and the water bill to follow!

You may well consider that a mix of lawn and easy care ground cover is a viable option and kinder on the pocket.

The most effective control of weeds in lawns is a proper and continuing program of watering, fertilising and mowing. Deep and regular watering is essential to promote good root growth. Frequent light watering encourages shallow surface root systems that make vegetation vulnerable to dry periods.

Top dressing with sand or sandy loam is useful only as a means of filling minor depressions. A selection chart with appropriate notes is attached to help you choose the most suitable grass for our lawn requirements.

There are now a wide range of newer turf materials available in Darwin. Not all are listed on the attached sheet - if in doubt seek advice.

Unfortunately many of the prepackaged mixes sold in garden shops and supermarkets are **not suitable for Darwin**. Refer to the Department of Primary Industries' Agnotes, before purchasing lawn seed and you can save yourself both time and money.

## Water — A Precious Commodity

Water is expensive and precious and an important factor, particularly during the dry season.

Do consider trickle irrigation right from the word go when planting out your garden. This, of course, is not always possible but it really should be considered no matter how new or how mature your garden might be.

There are now any number of easy-to-install irrigation systems for home use, and clock timers give the home gardener a freedom and control unknown twenty years ago.

Remember, too, that it is most effective and most economical to water at night. Watering at night reduces evaporation and trickle irrigation is the most economical and effective method of watering.

When installing a micro-irrigation system it is a good idea to include a filter to help prevent individual emitters blocking. This simple step can save you a lot of time and trouble further down the line.

## Fertilising

Fertilising your garden and lawn should be carried out on a regular basis in the months of April, July and October. The best type of all-round fertiliser to use in Darwin is probably a mixture of blood and bone with trace elements or your own choice of organic fertiliser. It is now possible to purchase inorganic slow release fertilisers, especially formulated for lawns. These prevent 'surge growth' after application and can provide nutrients for up to twelve weeks.

Whilst it is important to fertilise it is also important not to be too heavy-handed. Make sure you follow the manufacturer's directions. Organic fertilizers such as blood and bone should be placed under mulch for maximum effect.

## Home Composting

Council has a separate information sheet on home composting. The RELN Compost Bins are available at the Civic Centre and

at the Shoal Bay Regional Recycling Centre out at the Tip.

Many home gardeners decide to have two or three home compost bins and find that not only do the home compost bins fit the recycling philosophy, but they also save continual trips to the Tip and provide an ongoing supply of mulch and rich compost for home use.

Home composting returns organic matter to the soil, provides an excellent cheap potting mix or garden mulch, makes a perfect fertiliser for home use when mixed with blood and bone, and is a useful outlet for the disposal of vegetable and fruit peelings.

The rewards of home composting are considerable and everybody benefits. Queries about the RELN Compost Bin can be directed to PH: 8930 0595.

## Also Included

The lists of Agnotes provided by the Department of Primary Industries is included. These notes are aimed specifically at the home gardener and may be obtained from the Department of Primary Industry and Fisheries, Berrimah Farm - PO Box 79, Berrimah, Northern Territory 0828.