

Plant of the Week

Burrawang Palm

Macrozamia communis

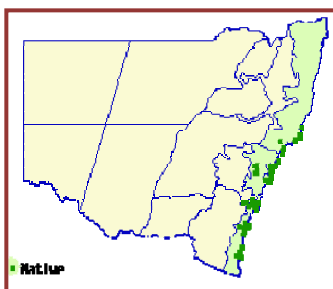


Macrozamia communis - Female cone

The “**Burrawang**” is called a “**palm**” but in fact it is a **cycad**, a plant of ancient times more closely related to **conifers** and *Ginkgo* than it is to the relatively recently evolved family of **monocots**, the **palms**. There are probably about 40 species of *Macrozamia* in Australia. The Burrawang Palm, *Macrozamia communis* grows in forests along the coast and ranges of eastern New South Wales.

Cycads can be traced back to the Permian, about 280 mya and some rude individuals have postulated, wildly incorrectly of course, that the extinction of dinosaurs was due to constipation when the dominant flora changed from Carboniferous ferns rich in oils to almost inedible, unpalatable cycads!

The seeds of cycads are highly toxic. In Australia, Aboriginal people knew how to treat the poisonous seeds to remove the toxins before they were eaten. In the 1950s, cycads (*Cycas circinnalis*) growing on islands of the northern Pacific, were linked to serious degenerative locomotor diseases. It seems the Chamorro People of Guam knew how to treat the seeds, but they also included fruit bats in their diet, and the fruit bats, too, ate cycad seeds. The toxin became concentrated in the flesh of the fruit bats with inevitable serious consequences for those who consumed them.



Map: National Herbarium of NSW,
<http://plantnet.rbgsyd.nsw.gov.au/>

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Macrozamia communis - Male cones