

Melastoma *malabathricum*

**Blue Tongue, Native
Lasiandra, Indian
Rhododendron**

From late summer, through autumn and into winter, we are re-acquainted with the dense purple canopies of *Tibouchina* (now known as *Pleroma*) that adorn many street verges. For decades, these gaudy individuals from tropical rainforests of Central and South America have dominated Australian gardens. However, there is a delightful Australian relative, *Melastoma malabathricum*,



(*Melastoma affine*), with the unusual common name of **Blue Tongue**. It might not be quite as flamboyant as many of its South American relatives, but still a charming garden plant.

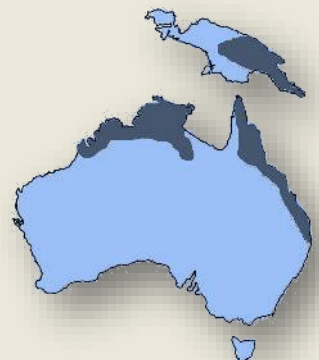


Fruits of Blue Tongue, *Melastoma malabathricum*.

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Melastoma malabathricum, grows as a shrub or small tree along the east coast of Australia, from northern New South Wales, through Queensland, and across the top in the Northern Territory and northern Western Australia. The leaves are simple but characteristically

have three distinct main veins running from the base of



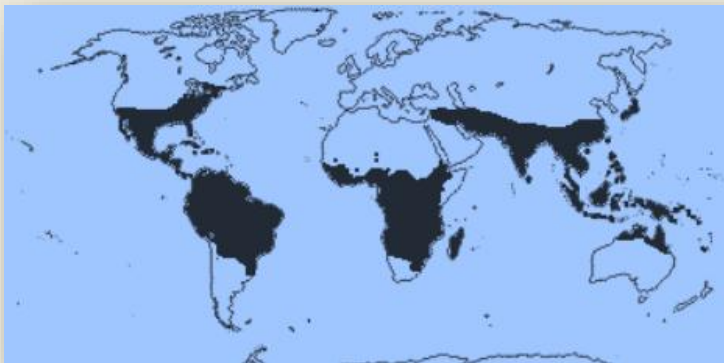
the leaf to the tip. It's also widespread through tropical and subtropical regions, from the Seychelles to Asia and the western Pacific. It has an edible fruit, with soft, dark blue-black pulp. Although it is a native of northern New South Wales, it is spread by seed and has become naturalised in some regions, surprisingly, even as far south as bushland in the Lane Cove area. In Australia, Blue Tongue is an important **pioneer species** of wet sclerophyll and rainforest habitats and can be useful in rehabilitation of degraded lands. In spite of the flowers offering no nectar to pollinators, they produce copious amounts of pollen to attract native bees and honeybees. Unfortunately, honeybees outcompete native bees in the hunt for pollen-

Why the name **Blue Tongue**? The succulent edible fruit stains the mouth and *Melastoma* is derived from the Greek *mela* μέλα which means black and *stoma* στομα meaning mouth.

Melastoma is one of about 160 genera (6000 species) in the family **Melastomataceae**. Most occur the New World, but others are found scattered through tropical and subtropical regions of Africa, Asia and the Pacific, with a few species reaching temperate latitudes.



Pleroma (formerly *Tibouchina*)



Present day distribution of the family Melastomataceae throughout the world.

Most of the purple-flowered garden plants that we once knew as *Lasiandra*, and more recently as *Tibouchina*, are now classified as *Pleroma*.

The earliest records of Melastomataceae are from Eocene (56 – 34

mya) fossils from north-eastern North America and there are fossil records from the Oligocene (34 – 23 mya) and Miocene (23 – 5 mya) in North America and also Eurasia. Melastomataceae reached Africa more recently, about 14-12 mya, spreading from there to Madagascar, India and south-east Asia including Australia. The distribution was originally thought to be the result of breakup of Gondwanan continents but is now explained by long-distance dispersal.

Hosking J R, Conn B J, Lepschi B J, Barker C H. 2011. Plant species first recognised as naturalized or naturalizing for New South Wales in 2004 and 2005. *Cunninghamia* 12(1): 85-114.

Plantnet: <http://plantnet.rbgsyd.nsw.gov.au/cgi-bin/NSWfl.pl?page=nswfl&lvl=fm&name=MELASTOMATACEAE>

Renner S S, Clausen G, Meyer K. 2001. Historical biogeography of Melastomataceae: the roles of Tertiary migration and long-distance dispersal. *American Journal of Botany*, 88(7):1290-1300.

Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melastoma_malabathricum

Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alstonville,_New_South_Wales

Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melastoma_affine

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