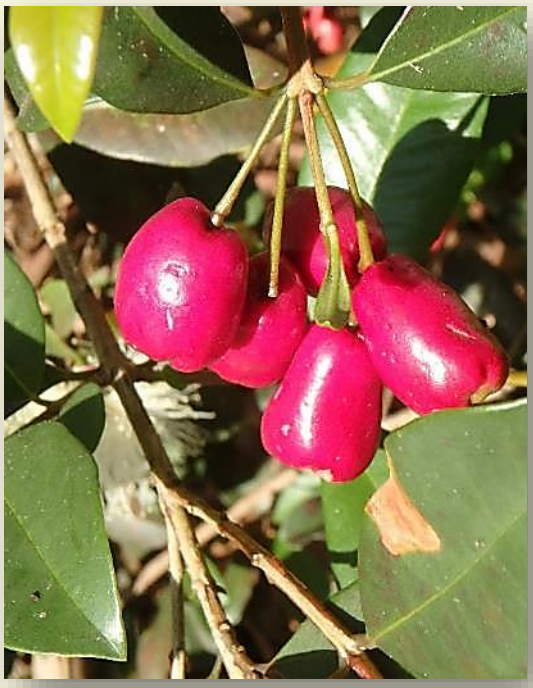
Syzygium Lillipillies

Legendary Australian icons

Syzygium paniculatum

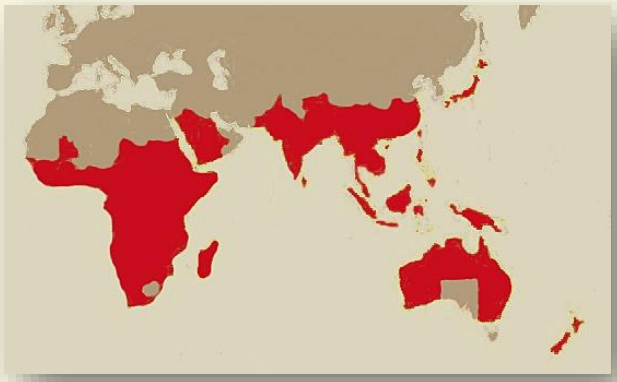
Australians have long had a love affair with Lillipillies which are increasingly popular as garden plants, and much sought after for hedging. They are prized not only for their handsome glossy green leaves but also for their red, pink, cream or white powderpuff flowers and glossy, colourful, crimson or purple succulent fruits. Read the recent article on Lillipillies (*Syzygium* species) by Darryn Crayn and Stuart Worboys in *The Conversation*.

There are about 1200 species of *Syzygium*, most are evergreen trees and in their native state are widespread across the world, from Africa and Madagascar, to southern Asia and the Pacific. *Syzygium* has its origins in tropical northern Australia and from 17 Mya, as *Sahul* (Australia and New Guinea) collided with *Sunda* (south-east Asia). The first migrations took place to the north, then east across the Pacific and west to India and Africa. It is therefore not surprising that the region from northern Australia to south-east Asia has the greatest diversity of species. The genus *Syzygium* is surely diverse: it has more species than any other *tree* genus.



Syzygium australe

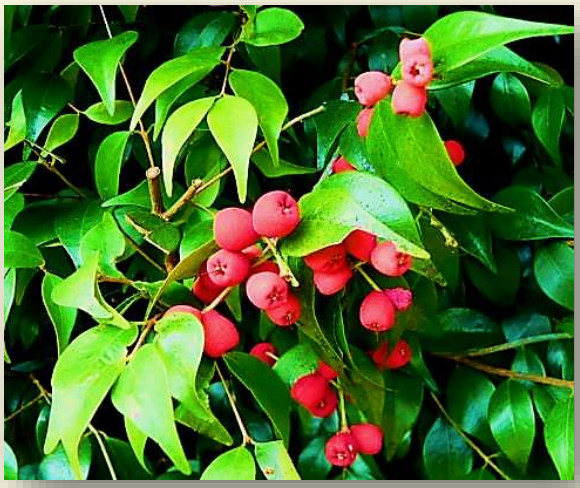
Australia has about 75 species, and apart from South Australia and Tasmania, they can be found in all states. By far the



World-wide distribution of *Syzygium* – modified from: *Royal Botanic Gardens Kew*, Plants of the World Online

most species, about two thirds, occur in north-eastern Queensland in the *Wet Tropics World Heritage Area*. The first leaf fossils of *Syzygium* are from the early Miocene deposits of Kiandra in NSW, with an age of 17 – 30 Ma for the *tribe* Syzygieae, evidence that *Syzygium* may be the most successful immigrant ever to move from Sahul (Australia) into Sunda (South-east Asia).

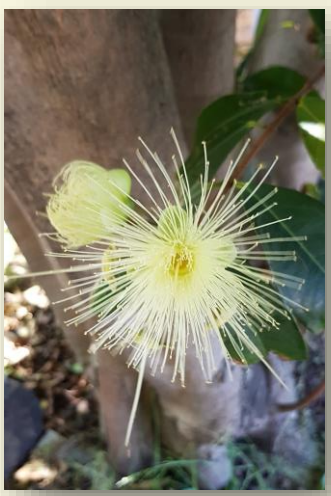
Lillipillies are important world-wide both as food and as medicines. One of the best know species is *cloves* – a powerful spice from the dried flower buds of a Lillypilly from Indonesia, *Syzygium aromaticum*.



Riberry, *Syzygium luehmannii*

Dried Clove Buds. Photo Brian Arthur, GNU Free Documentation Licence.

One very popular Australian Lillypilly is the *Riberry*, *Syzygium luehmannii*, which is not only sought after as a garden plant but also for its anti-oxidant rich fruit. In south-east Asia, the Semarang Rose Apple, *Syzygium samarangense*, is a delicious, red-skinned, white-fleshed fruit that regularly appears on buffet tables. It's rich in a wide range of vitamins and minerals and bark, fruit and flowers have antibacterial properties.



Semarang Rose Apple, *Syzygium samarangense*

Myrtle Rust – *Austropuccinia psidii*, on foliage in Puerto Williams, Isla Navarino, in Southern Chile.

One of the greatest threats to Australian Lillypillies is *myrtle rust* – a devastating fungal disease, *Austropuccinia psidii*, introduced in 2010 from South America. Lillypillies belong to the plant family Myrtaceae – the Myrtle family – and myrtle rust which spreads by wind-borne spores, has the potential to destroy leaves, flowers and fruit. Leaves affected by myrtle rust are not difficult to identify, the golden yellow spores stand out like beacons against the normally green foliage.

Crayn and Worboys conclude their contribution to *The Conversation* with these words: *Lillipillies are an Australian origin story. They're a major contributor to rainforest biodiversity and important to Indigenous cultures. And they've endeared themselves to generations of gardeners and cooks. Given all this, Lillipillies deserve to be recognised – and protected – as Aussie icons.*

Alison Downing, Brian Atwell, Karen Marais, Kevin Downing
School of Natural Sciences

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

MACQUARIE University
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