

Plant of the Week

Ficus benjamina L.

Ficus benjamina (Weeping Fig) has many synonyms in Latin, English and other languages¹. Many of the names come from its weeping habit. In Sydney it stands out as a very distinctive but sometimes overlarge street tree. It is, however, perhaps best known as an indoor plant or bonsai subject. One of the reasons for its many local names is its very wide continuous tropical distribution from Northern Australia to India.

The parks of Sydney are dominated by the **Moreton Bay Fig** (*Ficus macrophylla*) but this gives little idea of the range of plant forms in the genus *Ficus*, which comprises ~ 850 species and includes shrubs, vines and epiphytes in addition to trees. At least 15 species are endemic to Australia and fall ecologically into two groups: **hemi-epiphytes** and trees occurring in rain forests; and **lithophytic** trees and shrubs from arid regions².

The ‘fruits’ clearly visible on the local fig trees are not really ‘fruits’ at all but are **synconia**. Each **synconium** is an inflorescence in which the flowers and seeds are enclosed in a fleshy cone. There is a small opening at the top of the cone which provides access to the flowers for the small wasps which are the obligate pollinators. Most fig species can be pollinated by only one wasp species and it is possible plants



and insects have coevolved over ~60-80 myr since the origin of the genus. About 60 species of *Ficus* have been introduced to Hawaii but in only four cases have the wasp pollinators also been introduced.

The preparation of this ‘Plant of the Week’ reminded me of my undergraduate days at Cambridge. One of the authorities on *Ficus*³ is **E.J.H. Corner FRS** (1906-1996) who lectured on tropical Botany. Professor Corner was an old style botanist of enormous knowledge who held very strongly that direct inspection of living plants should be the basis of botany. He would, I am sure, have been ready to dismiss the intrusion of molecular biology² into the taxonomy of *Ficus* as irrelevant! His obituary⁴ could

well be reproduced as ‘Botanist of the Week’!

1) Wikipedia 2) Rønsted, N. et al. (2008) Mol. Phyl. Evol. 48: 12-22 3) Berg, C.C. and Corner, E.J.H. (2005) Moraceae (Ficus) in Noteboom, H.P.(Ed.) Flora Malesiana ser1 vol 17, National Herbarium Nederland, Leiden, pp 1-730 4) <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-professor-e-j-h-corner-1364297.html>

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