

The kurrajong

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The kurrajong, *Brachychiton populneum*, is a well-known and highly regarded tree of inland New South Wales. Not only is it shapely and shady, but it is also an excellent fodder tree which can be readily lopped for stockfeed during droughts.

Kurrajongs are moderately tall (5 to 20 m high) with a dense canopy of shiny green leaves and a thick smooth grey-barked trunk. The pale-coloured soft spongy wood has no commercial use. The leaves, which are from 10 to 15 cm long, vary in shape and may be ovate (egg-shaped) and entire, or deeply three-lobed with narrow, pointed lobes.

Flowers are borne in clusters near the ends of the branches and each flower is cream-coloured with reddish spots on the inside, usually about 1.5 cm across and bell-shaped with five out-turned lobes. The trees flower mostly during summer.

The fruit is a woody, boat-shaped pod, about 7 cm long, which is at first green but ripens black, splitting down one side to release about 20 yellow hairy seeds. The hairs on the seeds can cause intense irritation to sensitive skin.

DISTRIBUTION

The kurrajong occurs naturally in all the major climatic divisions of the State. It grows best on well-drained soils from the tablelands westward as far as Wanaaring in the north and Narrandera in the south. In the west, kurrajong is most common

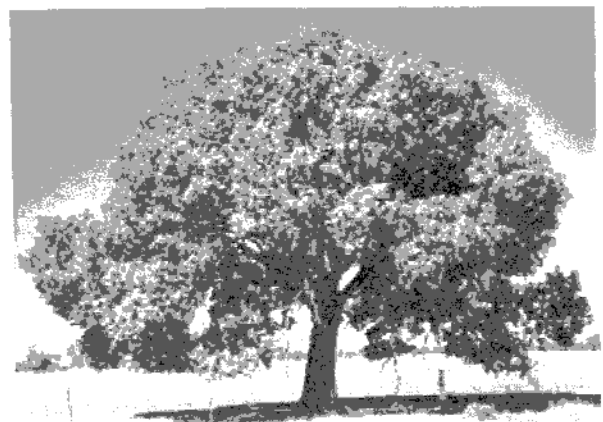
on deep sandy soils with mallee and on hillslopes with sandy soils. In the east it is common on many soil types. Where it occurs there is often limestone in the soil at depth. It is rarely found on heavy clay soils or in high tableland areas which experience prolonged cold periods.

Annual average rainfall increases from 300 mm at the western limit of its distribution to about 600 mm in the east. Although kurrajong does not occur naturally on the very wet and humid coastal areas of the State, it will grow quite well there provided it is planted on well-drained soils.

Kurrajongs are rarely removed when land is cleared of timber because they have little effect on crop or pasture production and are useful in supplying drought forage. It is now common for kurrajongs to be the only trees left standing in many paddocks in the west and central west of New South Wales.

DROUGHT FEEDING AND LOPPING

Trees may be lopped whenever forage is required. Once lopped it usually takes three to five years for kurrajongs to grow enough to be lopped again.



The kurrajong is useful for shade and is also an excellent fodder tree. Photo: PL Milthorpe



Usually only one or a few trees are lopped at a time, often in conjunction with grain feeding. When lopping large trees it may be advisable to cut only a portion at a time to stop stock concentrating around a single tree. Stock readily eat both leaves and smaller branchlets.

Lopping can be done with an axe or saw as the wood is soft and easy to cut. If trees have been planted mainly for use as ornamentals or as a windbreak, lop as required to shape them. Make the first cut from below, followed by a cut above the limb to prevent damage to the bark below the branch being lopped.

No cases of poisoning have been recorded from stock eating kurrajong. However, it is suspected that feeding may be dangerous after rain. The seeds contain compounds known to be harmful, especially to fowls. However, this risk is normally not great where the trees are most commonly grown.

How to lop native trees and shrubs for fodder

Lopping is the removal from a tree or shrub of foliage which does not compromise the trunk or primary branches. The critical limitation is that the continued health of the native tree or shrub is not affected.

The continual lopping of any tree or shrub will affect its natural resilience and growth habit and this will affect its ecosystem and biodiversity function. To ensure the retention of biodiversity values, shade and shelter, and seed sources for regeneration, it is suggested that no more than about 60% of tree or shrub foliage be removed and that some tree or shrubs remain unlopped.

The best method of lopping native vegetation is to cut straight through branches to minimise the potential for insect or bacterial attack. There are also advantages in pruning and shaping the tree or shrub, rather than heavily lopping it. This will assist the recovery of the tree/shrub and help retain environmental, economic and aesthetic values.

Higher branches should be lopped so that regrowth is out of the reach of stock. In addition, enough foliage should be left so that the tree/shrub still provides shade and shelter.

Lopped trees/shrubs will need good management and a number of favourable seasons to regenerate. Trees and shrubs should not be used in successive droughts if they have not recovered from previous lopping. The recovery rate of trees/shrubs that have previously been lopped can be used as an indicator of the sustainability of the lopping method. Long-term use should not result in any modification to the structure or composition of the

associated vegetation community. Consider how the trees/shrubs are to be rehabilitated and how long that is likely to take.

USES

Because kurrajongs are easy to establish and long lived, they are often planted in tree lots, and as windbreaks or ornamentals. For windbreaks, plant two or more rows of trees about 7 to 8 m apart for best effect.

Historically, the fibre of the bark was used by Aborigines for making cordage and nets, while early explorers and settlers roasted and ground the seeds to make a pleasant beverage.

PROPAGATION

Kurrajongs readily grow from seed and are easily propagated. There are several ways of establishing seedlings and planting out young trees in the paddock.

Raising seedlings

If large numbers are required, seed can be raised in seed trays with normal seed raising mix. Soak the seed overnight in boiled water to break its natural dormancy and encourage a more uniform germination. After soaking the seeds, sow two or three to each tube or container of soil. If more than one seed germinates then retain the better seedling and discard any others, or transplant them into another tube.

Seedlings can also be grown on the farm by planting seeds into well-prepared and well-drained beds during September. Keep the soil moist for two to six weeks to allow for germination. Subsequently, thin seedlings to 5 to 7 cm apart along rows 10 to 15 cm apart.

Tubed seedlings a few months old and about 10 to 20 cm tall are available from Forests NSW nurseries and other commercial sources.

Following good spring and early summer rains, many young seedlings germinate, especially near stockyards or in disturbed or ploughed areas where stock access has been restricted. These seedlings can be dug up and transplanted wherever necessary.