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# MANGROVES OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY, AUSTRALIA: *IDENTIFICATION and TRADITIONAL USE*

Glenn Wightman

Ethnobiology Project, Parks and Wildlife Service  
Department of Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts  
PO Box 496, Palmerston NT 0831, Australia



Northern Territory Government



Principal Illustrator

Milton Andrews

NORTHERN TERRITORY BOTANICAL BULLETIN No. 31

**EXTRACT: *Cerbera* (pp. 68–70)**

Prepared for online viewing and download by the Department of Land Resource Management, 2015

DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES, ENVIRONMENT & THE ARTS  
and GREENING AUSTRALIA NT

DARWIN 2006

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**Cerbera****APOCYNACEAE**

**DERIVATION:** *Cerbera* is named after the dog Cerberus from classical Greek mythology, a monster with three heads whose den was at the entrance of Hades, probably in reference to the poisonous qualities of the plant.

A genus of seven species, four occur in Australia. *Cerbera manghas* is known from three areas in the NT.

***Cerbera manghas* L.****Native Frangipani**

**DERIVATION:** Derivation of *manghas* uncertain, but possibly in reference to *Mangifera*, the genus to which the edible tropical fruit tree, the mango (*M. indica*), belongs.

**DESCRIPTION:** Tree to 12 m high; copious white latex; bark smooth, grey; twigs stout, hollow. Leaves spirally arranged; petiole 15–60 mm long; lamina elliptic-obovate, 15–25 cm long, 4–7 cm wide, cuneate, acuminate, entire, slightly discolorous, prominent tertiary venation. Inflorescence terminal, cymose, pedunculate. Flowers actinomorphic, bisexual, strongly scented, 30–40 mm long, 20–35 mm wide, white with a red centre. Sepals 5, lanceolate, 12–25 mm long. Corolla tube to 35 mm long, red at top; corolla lobes 5, ovate to obovate, 18–26 mm long. Stamens 5, included; anthers, 2-locular, lanceolate, pollen granular. Ovary superior, bicarpellate; style head composed of 2 annular swellings. Fruit drupaceous, flesh thin, mesocarp thick, fibrous, ovoid-globose, 6–7 cm long, 3.5–4 cm wide, 3.5–4 cm thick, deep purple to red when ripe; seed 1 per locule, compressed, elliptic to oblong.

**HABITAT:** Found in coastal monsoon vine forests and coastal swales, and mangrove areas with a freshwater input.

**DISTRIBUTION:** Known from three areas on the northern coast of the NT; a single population at Popham Bay on Cobourge Peninsula, a population on the west coast of Bathurst Island and three populations from Marchinbar Island in the Wessel Islands group. Common in north Queensland, also widespread and common in Malaysia and Melanesia.

**DISTINCTIVE FEATURES:** Elongate, glossy leaves clustered toward branch tips; white sap; white sweetly scented flowers; large, ovoid red-purple fruit, breaking down to reveal a fibrous, light brown seed covering.

**ETHNOBOTANY:** In Fiji this species is used medicinally to treat toothache by placing it in hollow teeth (Pillai 1987).

The fruit of *Cerbera manghas* is poisonous if eaten and it causes severe nausea. However, it has occasionally been used as an emergency treatment in cases of

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food poisoning (Mastaller 1997). The white sap can be used as a purgative and haemostat, while a fruit extract is used to relieve rheumatic pain (Mastaller 1997).

**NOTES:** The distinctive fruit are regularly found washed up at the high tide mark around the NT coastline. However, they are often deeply weathered and probably unable to germinate.

*Cerbera manghas* generally occurs in the littoral zone behind the mangroves, and has often been recorded in monsoon vine thicket in Melanesia (Forster 1992). The known populations in the NT are similarly from coastal monsoon vine thickets and coastal swales. Tomlinson (1986) notes the limited salt tolerance of this species. It seems likely that in the future *C. manghas* will be found in more NT mangrove communities with a strong fresh water influence, as more viable fruit from existing populations are distributed around the NT coastline.

The population at Popham Bay on Cobourg Peninsula consists of six adult plants and a number of juveniles. These plants appear to be of relatively recent origin, which was confirmed on site by an Aboriginal traditional owner of the area (C. Cunningham pers. comm. 1996). It seems likely that fertile fruit may have been deposited above the high tide mark by surges associated with cyclonic winds in the mid 1980s.

This species is sometimes cultivated as a street tree and garden ornamental in the Top End. However, the very similar *Cerbera odollam* is more commonly used in gardens and median strips, notably lining a street at Pularumpi, Melville Island. Both species perform well in cultivation, growing quickly and producing sweetly scented flowers year round.

There has been confusion about the application of names to the two species, they can be distinguished most easily and reliably by the following key (Middleton 1999):

1. Stamens inserted near mouth of corolla tube, corolla tube pubescent inside for about the entire length, corolla usually white with a red eye .....*C. manghas*
1. Stamens inserted around middle of corolla tube, corolla tube pubescent inside only in top half, corolla usually white with a yellow eye .....*C. odollam*

The fruit of *Cerbera odollam* contain cardiac glycosides and in India the plant is called the 'suicide tree', this species being used more than any other to commit suicide (Randerson 2004).

References: Forster 1996, Forster 1992, Middleton 1999.

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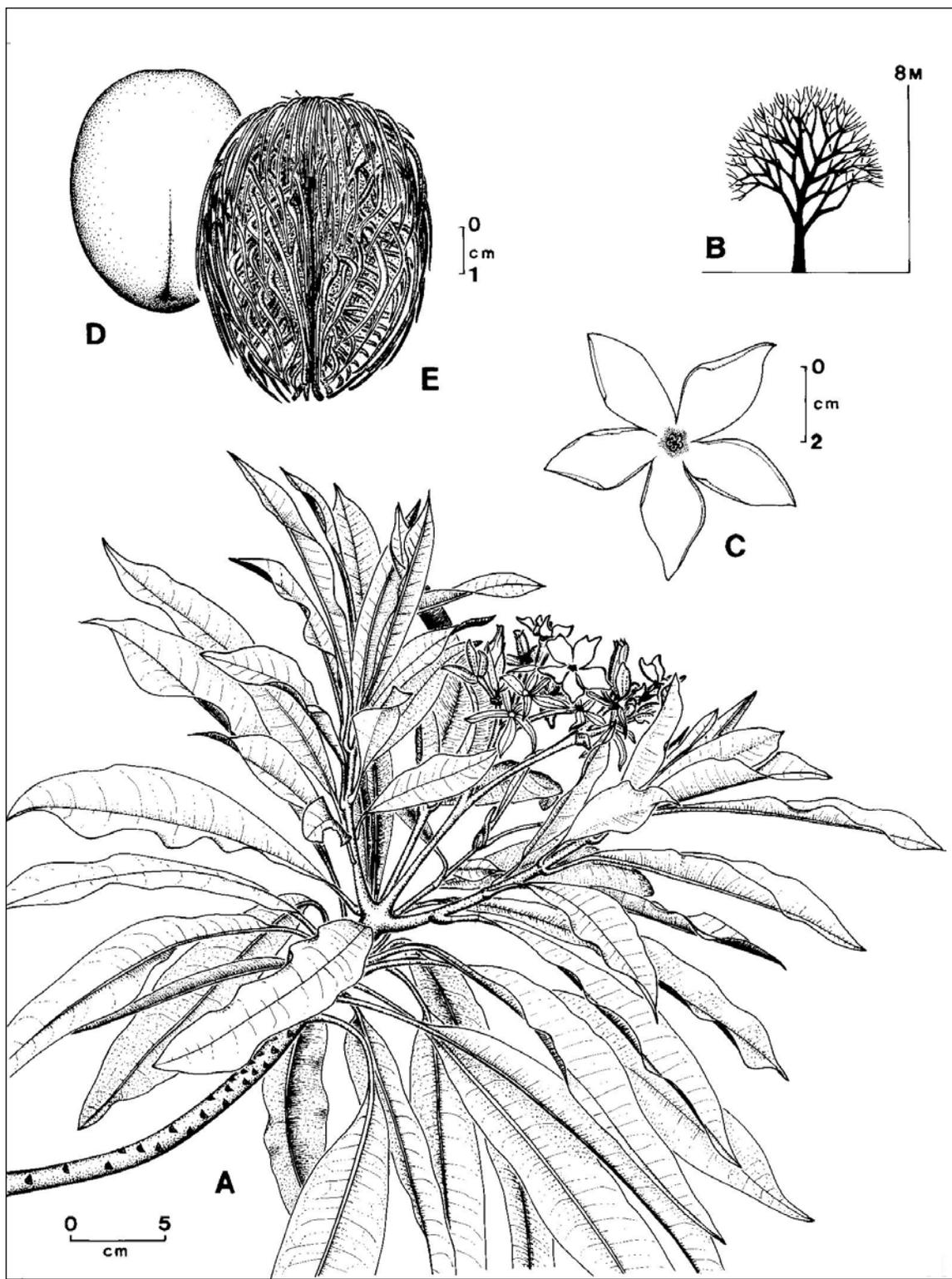


Figure 18. *Cerbera manghas*. A, flowering branch; B, habit; C, flower; D, fresh fruit; E, weathered or 'drift' fruit, often seen washed up on beaches (A, cultivated from G.M. Wightman 6731; C, E, I. Cowie 7437).