

Nature Notes

Wild Sarsaparilla



Sarsaparilla? Isn't that a drink found in the southern US? Yes, a drink is made from the roots of true sarsaparilla, a tropical, prickly vine found in southern climes. The Kimberley Nature Park is home to a plant called sarsaparilla (*Aralia nudicaulis*) but this one is from an entirely different plant family, is not a vine and has no prickles. However, the roots have been used to make a refreshing drink reminiscent of that made from the true sarsaparilla and so has come to be known by the same name.



Photo by J. Duncan

Our local sarsaparilla has had many historical uses. The roots have been used to make 'root beer' and tea, as well as being eaten as an emergency food. The fruit can be made into jelly or wine while the shoots can be eaten as a potherb. Medicinally, First Nations peoples have used various parts of the plant for a range of both internal and external purposes.

Because the wild sarsaparilla multiplies by creeping rhizomes, this elegant plant is often found in large groups. With the 3 stalks holding up the 3-5 leaflets at a uniform height the leaves form a wide-spread carpet on the shady forest floor. As the leaves appear in May they are often a striking bronze colour, gradually changing to a fresh green as they mature.



Photo by J. Duncan



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What's most striking about this plant is the way the flowers form on shorter stalks coming from the base of the plant. These ball-like clusters of flowers, usually found in groups of 3, are little treasures hidden under the canopy formed by the leaves, waiting to be discovered. Once you know what to look for, you'll find this useful and remarkable plant in many forested places in the Park.

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