

## *CISSUS HYPOGLAUCA*: keep it under control

By Jennifer Liney



Do not ever plant the woody climber *Cissus hypoglauca* in a domestic garden, particularly if it moist and shady. It will very soon take over your garden with all its tamed flowers and shrubs, and probably your house as well. If you doubt me, drive to Narooma and see how it has taken over great swathes of the moist forest on the western side of the Princes Highway south of Dalmeny. But it behaves quite well if confined to a pot, either indoors or out; it enjoys good light, but not strong sunlight, and even withstands some neglect.

Commonly called Water Vine, or Native Grape, it is a member of the Vitaceae family, to which grape vines belong. There are only two native genera in New South Wales belonging to this family. The leaves of the Water Vine are palmately compound with five leaflets, that is, the leaflets all arise from the one point; the round fruit are purple and presented in open bunches. Not really like grapes, but sort of. The small yellow flowers appear in summer, ripening in winter to the purple fruit.

*C. hypoglauca* has had many uses over the centuries. The fruit has long been part of the Aboriginal diet, and also for early Australian settlers, who used them for making jelly and jam. Strong loops of stem were used to aid climbing trees to collect animals and honey from native bees nests.

Some vines produce sweet fruit, but more often it is somewhat astringent. The fruit contains mucous, so were used as a gargle remedy for sore throats. Whether the gargle is a sure cure is not known. Short lengths of thick stem (that have been recorded as growing to a diameter of 35cm!!) cut at both ends drip sap that is drinkable; hence the common name Water Vine. In Les Robinson's *Field Guide to the Native Plants of Sydney*, he quotes from the 1856 publication *The Letters of Rachel Henning*, that 'sometimes the huge cables reach from the top of one tree to another at some distance, the slack hanging a few feet from the ground, and so providing a natural swing where one can sit and enjoy a rest and a pipe after lunch in the brush'.

Tendrils are produced opposite each leaf. A branch will wave about in the air until a tendril connects with something solid, when it very quickly holds fast and the plant takes another leap upwards.

*Cissus* comes from a Greek word *kissos*, meaning ivy. Apparently it was thought that the leaves of the Water Vine resembled those of the ivy plant. *Hypoglauca* is again from the Greek; *hypo* meaning nearly, or not quite, and *glauca*, blue-green. So this means that the undersides of the leaves are almost blue-green.

The botanist responsible for naming this species was an American, Asa Gray, probably the most important American botanist of the 19<sup>th</sup> C. He was another qualified doctor who abandoned medicine for the delights of studying and teaching botany. He corresponded with British and European plant people, among them Charles Darwin. Over 300 letters written by these two men to each other have been preserved.

In 1854, Gray published the name *Cissus hypoglauca* as a new species, noting that the Type specimen was collected in 'New South Wales, near Sydney'. *Cissus australasica*, *Nothocissus hypoglauca*, and

*Vitis hypoglauca* are all synonyms. That means the names have been published and have been used, but, for various reasons, are no longer accepted.

*Cissus hypoglauca* has an interesting history, but we should leave it in the bush where it belongs.

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