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Castanospermum australe

MORETON BAY CHESTNUT is an evergreen tree. Native to north-eastern Australia (particularly New South Wales) it has pea-like, yellow maturing to orange or red flowers. It is also known as Australian chestnut, Bay chestnut, Bean-tree, Black bean, *Puupapu* (Finnish), and Spanish chestnut.

The flowers are pollinated by birds.

Warning – Moreton bay chestnut has poisonous seeds. Small quantities can cause abdominal pains, diarrhoea, dizziness and vomiting. The leaves and seeds are said to be poisonous for some animals.

Australe means ‘southern, or of or from the Southern hemisphere’.

The poisonous beans (seeds) were ground for flour by some of the Australian Aborigine tribes, after they had been subjected to lengthy preparation. This processing involved soaking them for 8-10 hours, sun-drying them and then pounding them.

The very-strong, blackish wood (which is used commercially today for making furniture and for veneering and decorative carving, as well as for construction work), was chosen by the Australian Government for a gift they presented to the United Kingdom after the 2nd World War of the 1940s. This was to help towards the restoration of the destruction and bomb damage experienced in London during the War – and was the Speaker’s Chair which graces the House of Commons in the London Parliament today.

Modern scientific research seems to have taken an interest in Moreton bay chestnut for the first time in 1981 when King’s College, London carried out some initial work on the fruit (beans). Subsequent work by the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, in conjunction with St. Mary’s Hospital, London led in 1987 to the identification of potential anti-viral qualities in the fruit. Yet further more recent work showed that this could not only be useful in treating some cancers, and possibly the AIDS virus HIV, but also immunological studies themselves.