

Darwin initiative takes root with native trees

Tuesday, June 13, 2006



Wild Jasmine (*Tabernaemontana laurifolia*) - one of the attractive native landscaping plants which will feature at the nursery. Photo Ann Stafford, CaymanNature.

A botanical nursery dedicated to growing native trees and plants is to be established at the Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park. This project, developed under the Darwin Initiative, has recently taken root thanks to a generous private donation from Maples and Calder Partners, Henry Harford and Graham Lockington.

"It is hard to exaggerate the importance of this native tree-growing project. At present, very few species that are a natural part of Cayman's landscape can be bought at nurseries. As a result, native trees, which support our local bird, bee, bat and butterfly populations, have, over time, given way to foreign imports", said Eliza Strachan of the Shade Brigade. "This project will help reverse that insidious trend while introducing the public to the joys of Cayman's many pretty native shrubs and trees".

Another interesting aspect of the project is its experimental nature. The Botanic Park staff will be breaking new ground - developing ways to grow native trees, many of which have never been propagated before. Once this knowledge has been advanced, the future for Cayman's native trees - some of which, like the Ironwood, are becoming increasingly rare - will look very much brighter.

Indigenous trees do more than provide a haven for wildlife.

"They are resilient to storm damage, and they are well adapted to local weather conditions and so require less management, providing good landscaping and restoration options", said Dr Colin Clubbe, of Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. "These facilities will provide a reliable supply of good quality trees. It can never have been more timely to establish an indigenous tree nursery at the QEII Botanic Park."

The nursery will commence with the propagation of 6000 trees from twenty key species, with the objective of developing a broader variety as it progresses. The focus will be on attractiveness for landscaping, ease of maintenance, historical significance, and ecological value.

There will also be an opportunity to develop propagation techniques for some of the rare species. It is anticipated that the first saplings should be available for sale to the public by 2008.

"Many of the trees native to the Cayman Islands are critically endangered. Conservation organizations must begin work immediately on propagating and establishing these species in protected locations or we may lose them entirely," said Andrew Guthrie, General Manager of the Botanic Park.

"Several of these tree species are found in the Cayman Islands and nowhere else on earth. In some instances the entire population of these endangered native tree species consist of only a handful of widely scattered individual trees. The Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park endorses and is involved in this project so that we can preserve a portion of our native flora for generations to come."

Dr Mat Cottam, Darwin Research Fellow with the Department of Environment noted that the project was long awaited.

"This is an exciting and long-anticipated project, and one which would not have been possible without the active involvement of our Darwin Partners, CaymanNature, Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew and the Shade Brigade" said Dr Mat Cottam, Darwin Research Fellow with the Department of Environment.

"I would like to say a special thank you to Henry Harford and Graham Lockington, not only for their financial support, but also for their active impetus and encouragement of this project".

For more about the Darwin Initiative, a website is currently under construction at www.CaymanBiodiversity.com