

## *Parsonsia straminea*: a real survivor Jenny Liney



One of the most widespread climbers on our coastal fringe is *Parsonsia straminea*, or the Common Silkpod. Theoretically, it inhabits Subtropical and Temperate Rainforests, but actually it can be seen in almost any moist forest or woodland situation, often as a remnant in the most degraded of plant communities.

It is described as a woody climber with stems many metres long, attaching itself mostly to trees by what is known as adventitious roots; that is, roots that grow from the climbing stem and hold on to the host, but do not penetrate its bark. Old plants have very thick (9cm diam. have been recorded), fantastically convoluted stems. There used to be some wonderful specimens in the old littoral rainforest behind Loader Beach, just north

of Mystery Bay. Maybe they are still there.

Juvenile plants look like another species altogether. These are miniature creepers, with opposite leaves that are 10-15mm long, soft, heart shaped at the base, purple beneath and with prominent veins on the dark green upper surface. Adult leaves are larger, tougher, green and glossy on the upper surface and yellowy green below, and with rather wavy margins. On old plants in exposed situations, the leaves can be very large – to 24cm long and to 8cm wide - and very leathery.

In an adult plant, small, tubular flowers with 5 hairy petals are borne in a bundle near the ends of the branchlets; the flowers can be pink or yellowish, or sometimes white. The fruit is a green pod about 10cm long, tightly packed with hundreds of seeds, each with a fluffy tuft that enables the wind to take it away from the parent plant. Don't pick a pod and put it on your sunny kitchen window sill. When you get up in the morning, your kitchen will be filled with fluffy seeds that will waft gently away as you try to collect them. You will be doing this for quite some time; that is, trying to collect the seeds.

*Parsonsia* belongs to the family Apocynaceae, most of whose members exude milky or yellowish sap. The family is often called 'dogbane', after the American plant *Apocynum cannabinum* that has the common name 'dogbane'. *Parsonsia* is after James Parsons (1705-1770) a London physician and botanical author. The specific name *straminea* means chaffy, or straw coloured, in Latin, probably referring to the straw coloured hairs on the seeds.

This family contains *Mandevilla*, the Moth Vine *Araujia*, *Trachelospermum*, *Stephanotis* and *Vinca*, as well as some pretty toxic genera, notably *Oleander*, and *Allemanda*, together with natives *Marsdenia*, *Tylophora* and *Hoya*. It is said that the fruit and roots of the Silkpod are edible, but in view of the company that *Parsonsia* keeps, I wouldn't like to try them.

The Silkpod was first named *Lyonsia straminea* by Robert Brown in 1810, from a specimen collected in 1804 from the Hunter and Williams Rivers in New South Wales. Nowadays, after several misapplied names and erroneous identifications, the current name is universally accepted.