PLANT FACT SHEET

Inocarpus fagifer (Parkinson) Fosberg

GENUS *Inocarpus* **FAMILY** Fabaceae

COMMON NAMES Aila, Polynesian or Tahitian chestnut

EDIBLE PARTS AND USES

Edible parts: Seeds, Leaves, Nut, Fruit

Seeds are cooked and eaten.
The fleshy layer around the seed is eaten after cooking. The nuts are usually roasted although they can be boiled. Soaked nuts can be grated, mixed with coconut milk and roasted in banana leaves. Seeds can be stored by partly fermenting them in pits in the ground. Nuts can be stored for a considerable time but once shelled or cooked will only keep a short time.

DESCRIPTION

A tree from 9-30 m tall with buttresses at the base of the trunk. The trunk can be 7-90 cm across. The bark is dark grey and gives a red sap when cut. The branches droop downwards. The leaves are long (20 cm), leathery, shiny and feather veined. The leaves have short stalks and are one after the other (alternate) along the branch. The leaves are large and reddish when young and shiny green when adult. The flowers of Aila are not obvious. They are pale yellow and hang loosely on the twigs from the angles where leaves join. They have 5 narrow petals joined in a tube. The flowers smell sweetly. The fruit is irregular or kidney shaped and is a one seeded pod with ridges on the surface. It can be 8-10 cm across and 3 cm thick. The ripe fruit is yellow.

HABITAT

A tropical plant. It grows in the lowland primary and secondary forest from sea level up to 390 m altitude. It often grows near rivers and swamps and mostly as a clump of trees. Often they are very close to the water front. It also occurs in the Pacific Islands. It is usually in areas with a rainfall between 1500-4300 mm a year. They do better where there is no distinct dry season. It grows in soils with a pH from 5-14. It can grow in very alkaline soils. It can grow in salty and infertile soils.

PRODUCTION

Cultivation

Seeds are mostly planted. Seeds are also naturally distributed by bats. Plants can be propagated vegetatively by cuttings of half ripe wood. Seeds are the more common method of production. Seeds store easily for over a month but viability declines fairly rapidly in salt water. Trees prefer swampy ground but they also grow satisfactorily on higher slopes. It is presumed that plants have some salt tolerance as they often grow along the foreshore. A spacing of 5-10 m is probably suitable.

Harvesting and Seed Production

It grows moderately quickly. It can grow 2 m per year. Time to first production of nuts from planting is about 8 years. An average seed weighs 40 g. The yield can be 75 kg of fruit per tree per year. Fruit production occurs throughout the year but has a main season. Uncooked seeds can be stored.

Planting instructions

Aila

Inocarpus fagifer

What is an aila tree like?

An aila or Tahitian chestnut is a large tree 20 metres or more tall and with buttresses at the base of the trunk. The bark is dark grey and gives a red sap when cut. The branches droop downwards.

The leaves are long (20cm), leathery, shiny and feather veined. The leaves have short stalks and are one after the other (alternate) along the branch. Young leaves are pink.

The flowers of aila are not obvious. They are pale yellow and hang loosely on the twigs from the angles where leaves join. They have 5 narrow petals joined in a tube. The flowers smell sweetly.

The fruit is irregular or kidney shaped and has one seed inside. The outside of the pod is thick and leathery with a lumpy surface. It can be 8-10 cm across and 3 cm thick. The ripe fruit is yellow.

The fleshy layer around the seed is eaten.

Where do aila nut trees grow?

Aila nut trees grow near sea level. Often they are very close to the water front. They are common on some of the off shore islands.

They can grow in swampy ground and are common in some river estuaries.

Trees can probably grow from sea level up to about 300m altitude. They do better where there is no distinct dry season.

Aila nut trees do not only occur in Papua New Guinea but occur in some other South East Asian and Pacific countries as well. The map shows places where the trees occur naturally or commonly.

The countries include Malaysia, Indonesia and Pacific islands such as Fiji, Tahiti and Samoa as well as Papua New Guinea.

Growing Aila nuts.

Aila nut trees often grow self sown. The fruits are distributed by bats and other animals, although the seeds float easily as well.

Trees can be grown from seed. Trees can commence producing fruit about 8 years after planting.

It is also possible to grow trees from cuttings.

Aila nuts are produced seasonally. The season is about the beginning of the year probably from January to May.

Ails nuts as food.

The nuts are usually roasted although they can be boiled.

Soaked nuts can be grated, mixed with coconut milk and roasted in banana leaves.

Seeds can be stored by partly fermenting them in pits in the ground.

Nuts can be stored for a considerable time but once shelled or cooked will only keep a short time.

The wood of the tree is good for firewood.

NOTES

There are 3 Inocarpus species.
Aila

Inocarpus fagifer

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PICTURES



Credit: Food Plants International (Bruce French)



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