PLANT FACT SHEET

Bertholletia excelsa Humb. & Bonpl.

GENUS *Bertholletia* **FAMILY** Lecythidaceae

COMMON NAMES Brazil nut

EDIBLE PARTS AND USES

Edible parts: Nuts, Oil, Flavouring, Seeds - oil

The nuts can be eaten raw or roasted. They are also salted and are used in ice cream.
They are also sometimes grated with the stilt roots of Socratea palms and added to cassava flour.
An oil can be extracted from the seeds.

DESCRIPTION

A very large tree growing up to 55-60 m high. The trunk can be 14 m around. The bark is rich red or grey and deeply cracked. Leaves are dark green and turn reddish brown as they die off. The leaf stalks are 5-6 cm long. The leaves are 25-35 cm long by 8-12 cm wide. The flowers occur in long loose flower stalks. The flowers are about 2.5 cm wide. The fruit is a large woody capsule or pod 10-15 cm across and 15-20 cm long. It is brown and has a rough surface. The fruit can weigh over 2.5 kg. It grows at the ends of the thick branches. It ripens then falls from the tree. A lid type structure on the fruit opens and lifts off at maturity. Each fruit pod can contain 12-25 nuts. Each nut has its own shell. The nut is three sided. They are 3.5-6 cm long. The creamy white kernel inside the nut is edible.

HABITAT

A tropical plant. It requires a hot, humid tropical lowland climates. It grows naturally in areas with an average temperature of 24-27°C. It needs a minimum annual temperature of 20-23°C and a maximum of 30-33°C. The rainfall is 1400-2800 mm per year. The annual average humidity is between 79-91%. It is damaged by drought and frost. It suits hardiness zone 12.

PRODUCTION

Cultivation

The flowers are self sterile so a group of trees need to be planted near each other. Plants are grown from seed, cuttings or grafts. The seeds need to have the hard shell broken to help them to germinate. Seeds can only be stored for about 4-5 months. Because of the hard seed coat, seed may take 6-16 months to germinate. Treating seed by removing the seed coat and treating with phenyl mercuric acetate allows seeds to germinate in 3 months. Early germination can also be achieved by putting the nuts into sand a container with moist sand and storing it in a dry shady place for 6 months then removing the hard shell and planting the seeds.

Harvesting and Seed Production

Trees grow very slowly. They begin producing nuts 8-10 years after planting. The fruit take over one year (14-15 months) to ripen. One tree can produce 300 or more pods per year. One fruit can weigh 2.2 kg. The nuts are harvested when the fruit fall to the ground.

NOTES

There is only one Bertholettia species. Nuts have a high level of selenium. They are also high in sulphur containing amino acids. Selenium is helpful in preventing cancer.
The charcoal from Brazil nut shells is good at purifying water.

PICTURES



Credit: Food Plants International (Bruce French)



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