

A Botanical Ark

A dense, vibrant still life of various tropical fruits and vegetables. The composition is lush and overlapping, featuring a large cluster of bright red berries on thin, branching stems in the upper right. Below them are several ripe yellow bananas with some brown spots. To the left, there are green, elongated fruits, possibly starfruit, and a large, light green coconut. In the lower left, a piece of ginger root is visible. The background is filled with more greenery and smaller fruits, creating a rich, textured scene.

...Australian Permaculture Convergence 10
visits an ethnobotanical collection in Far
North Queensland. Photos: Russ Grayson



An ethnobotanical collection in Far North Queensland.

On a rural property among the forested hills of tropical North Queensland, Alan Carle and partner created the Botanical Ark where they maintain a collection of plant species used by cultures around the world.



A living museum...

Leaving the bus, the tour group from APC10 walks the short distance to the Ark.

This is a living landscape of useful plants, a forest of fruit, nuts, dyes and so much more.. a life's work. Here, a dam creates a lake in which the lush tropical vegetation is reflected. The rainforest forms a number of layers below the canopy of treetops - a complex understorey of smaller trees and shrubs interspersed with tall tree ferns. The feeling is of quietness, lushness, closeness.





Giant bamboo marks the entrance.

Above, Fiona enjoys a herbal brew while, below, lunch provides the opportunity to catch up for people who live in different regions of the country. There never seems enough time to catch up at convergences.





Tree with unusual buttress roots.



Rosella, an edible hibiscus.



Alan describes how the plants are used and where they come from.



Palm fruit

Walking through the cultivated forest at the Botanical Ark, a splash of colour caught my eye... a burst of bright red amid the green.

There's a pleasing symmetry about this array of pods. But... why the bright colour? To attract some rainforest animal to eat the fruit and spread the seed?

As the co-founder of the permaculture design system, Bill Mollison pointed out, birds, and other animals too, are the mobile part of the forest that the forest organism uses to multiply and spread itself - a whole systems appreciation of the forest and its plants and wildlife.



Spiky tree trunk

Wherever you looked, there was always some unusual plant, something previously unseen to stop and look at.

Here, we find a tree you wouldn't want to rub against.. a trunk covered in tough, sharp thorns. Why did it evolve what appears to be a defence like this... and against what?

There is so much to learn about the natural world... and its relation to humanity. I guess that's the mission of the people who created the Botanical Ark.



Permaculture educator Beck Lowe is far from her rural Victorian property. Here she encounters a rather sharp specimen.



Amazonian body paint.



The functional art of bridge building...



Tropical fruits of the forest...

For me, visiting the Botanical Ark was the highlight of Australian Permaculture Convergence 10 in Far North Queensland.

The Ark is a botanically valuable, living repository of a few of the plants that have sustained humanity over thousands of years, and the few hours we spent here really reinforced how close has been the evolution of plants and people.