

Plant of the Week

Cassia or *Senna*?



Senna pendula var. *glabrata*

Back in the olden days, this golden flowered shrub from Brazil and Paraguay in tropical South America was known as *Cassia bicapsularis*. Later it became *Cassia coluteoides*, now *Senna pendula* var. *glabrata*. Sadly it has become a major pest in eastern Australia and is listed in NSW as a *noxious weed*¹ for the Manly, Ryde and Warringah local government areas.

How do you tell a *Senna* from a *Cassia*? Both belong to the sub-family **Caesalpinioideae** of the pea family, **Fabaceae**, but they're not peas, don't have the characteristic papilionaceous (butterfly-like) pea flowers and don't have nitrogen fixing nodules on their roots². We used to think we had many species of *Cassia* in NSW, but most of these have now been assigned to the genus *Senna*. The inflorescences (flower clusters) of *Senna* are terminal, that is, they occur at the very ends of branches. Those of *Cassia* are axillary, and are produced along the branches, not at the end. In NSW, there is only one native *Cassia* species, *C. marksiana*, a rare tree in rainforests of NE NSW². We do have vast numbers of native Australian *Senna* species (~46)² and many of these grow in semi-arid and arid areas of the Australian outback.

In the biology courtyard extension, you can find *Cassia fistula*, the **Golden Shower Tree**, a native of Pakistran, India, Myanmar and Sri Lanka³, flowering

now. It is the national tree of Thailand and the state flower of Kerala in India. *Senna didymobotrya* (*Cassia didymobotrya*), a native of Africa⁴, is flowering on the northern side of building E8B.

If you have *Senna pendula* var. *glabrata* growing in your garden, consider getting rid of the whole plant. If you can't bear to do this, at least remove the pods and put them in your garbage bin (not green waste) so they can't spread to other gardens or to bushland.

Older Australians will know "senna" as a laxative made from the pods and/or leaves of *Senna alexandrina* from North Africa (Egypt and Sudan)⁵.

¹ NSW Department of Primary Industries:

<http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/agriculture/pests-weeds/weeds/noxweed>

² Plantnet: <http://plantnet.rbgsyd.nsw.gov.au/cgi-in/NSWfl.pl?page=nswfl&lvl=sp&name=Cassia-marksiana>

³ Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cassia_fistula

⁴ Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Senna_didymobotrya

⁵ Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Senna_alexandrina

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Cassia fistula