

FINGER LIMES

By Stephanie Jackson

Things are turning a bit sour on Sheryl Rennie's farm near the northern NSW town of Bangalow, but she is definitely not complaining.

Some years ago, after being bitten by a tick, Sheryl developed Lymes disease, a debilitating ailment that left her unable to continue with her work of making swimwear. As she struggled to overcome her illness, a friend recommended that she should try growing a few trees as a hobby. It was a hobby that was to turn her life around, and that Sheryl has turned into a successful business venture.

Although she had been involved in farming all her life, growing trees was a new experience, but following the success of the lemon myrtle, aniseed myrtle, and Davidson's plum trees that she initially planted, Sheryl was eager to experiment with other bush food species.

Finger limes (*Citrus australasica*) are a native species that grow wild among the forests of north-eastern NSW and south-eastern Queensland. "All the local people around here used to eat them", Sheryl said, "so I decided to put some in." That was seven years ago. Today she has 100 finger lime trees thriving on her secluded Possum Creek property.

They are evergreen and spiny trees that reach heights of 3-10 metres. Their white or pale pink flowers produce fruits that are about 100 mm long and as thick as a man's finger, and that range in colour from green and yellow, to pink, red, and even purple - with each having a subtle variation in flavour.

Despite their botanical relationship to more familiar citrus species, finger limes, Sheryl says, are considerably more demanding in their cultivation requirements. "People think they can grow them like ordinary citrus, in huge rows out in the sun," she says. "But you can't grow them like that. They are rainforest trees." They do best, she says, in a

situation similar to permaculture, where they are grown - as in the wild, and on her farm - in close proximity to other tree species.

Sheryl's farming methods are based on chemical free organic practices. Sugar cane mulch obtained from a chemical free farm is spread around the trees, and, as native plants require a minimal amount of fertiliser, only a small quantity of fish emulsion and seaweed based organic fertiliser is used, primarily in spring.

Originating from areas of normally high rainfall, finger limes require irrigation during dry times, although it is only the fruiting trees that Sheryl currently waters twice a week. The other trees, being well mulched, tolerate dry weather with no more adverse effects than to drop a few leaves. And while they enjoy a soak from heavy rain, the trees do not tolerate boggy conditions.

Finger limes have very varied growth habits, with some being naturally low and bushy, while others grow tall and straggly. Unlike many species of fruit trees that can produce higher yields with judicious pruning, finger limes, Sheryl says, should be left untouched, as cutting them back can result in die back. "A lot of people think you have to treat them along the same lines as citrus," she says. "But they are called microcitrus, and they are slightly different, and a lot harder to look after than ordinary citrus."

Little is known about the susceptibility of finger limes to diseases that affect other citrus species - such as black spot - but to date none of Sheryl's fruit has shown signs of any disease.

Some varieties of finger limes contain large numbers of seeds, but it is the seedless varieties that are the most popular with consumers, and that predominate on Sheryl's farm. Her original trees were obtained from a local citrus nursery whose owner, Judy Viola, had made the initial move to cultivate finger limes in the region, and who produces trees using budding material from the best of the many wild varieties grafted onto citrus root stock.

Grafted trees bear a small quantity of fruit approximately 18 months after planting, with six-year-old trees able to produce 15 kilos of fruit, and some growers reportedly harvesting 30 kilos from a single tree. The fruit of some varieties begins to ripen in December, and with a large range of varieties available, the fruiting season can last through to April or beyond. Picking the fruit that is often hidden among spiny foliage can be a difficult operation, but a considerable amount can be harvested merely by shaking the tree vigorously.

Finger limes can be used as an alternative to other citrus in a range of dishes, with their most common uses being in the production of jam and marmalade - with much of Sheryl's fruit sold to a local manufacturer – and in fish dishes.

Although she might eventually consider planting additional trees, Sheryl's future aim is to get growers together, even those with only a very small number of trees, to establish a co-op, and to ultimately construct a packing shed with a cool room and freezer to enable growers to have a central base to pack their fruit.

While most Australians are unaware of the existence of finger limes, there has been considerable interest in the trees in the USA, a fact that raises concerns that hesitation by local growers in recognising the value of this indigenous species may ultimately see overseas growers become the dominant suppliers of a uniquely Australian fruit.

Sheryl is confident that finger limes will eventually become more widely grown in Australia, although she warns that those with no farming experience – growers who “over feed them, over water them, over everything them” - may have limited success. The trees do best, she says, in areas with similar climatic conditions to those where they thrive in the wild, although some varieties may be able to be grown successfully in other regions. The best way to find out, Sheryl says, is to “try a couple and see how they go”.

The acid taste of finger limes may prove to be a popular flavour in the future, but the sweet taste of success for growers will depend on extensive research and marketing and on-going promotional work to spread the word that finger limes deserve a place on the world's culinary stage.

This article remains the copyright of Stephanie Jackson and cannot be reproduced in part or in its entirety without the written permission of the author.

**To read more articles by Stephanie Jackson and to see her
extensive gallery of images, log onto**

www.photographsofaustralia.com