

CHAPTER 11. CASUARINA

CASUARINA EQUISETIFOLIA Forst.

(Family : Casuarinaceae)

English—Beefwood Tree, Casuarina ; Marathi - Sura; Tamil - Cavukku ; Telugu – Chowka , Saruku ; Bengali - Belati-jhau

CASUARINA is indigenous growing along the coastal areas from Chittagong, eastwards through the islands of the Indian Ocean, to the islands of the Pacific and Queensland in Australia. It is under cultivation along many coastal districts in India. The tree was first introduced into the Royal Botanic Garden of Calcutta from Chittagong by Francis Hamilton in 1798. Extensive plantations of the tree may be seen from Madras up to Puri on the east coast, and in North Kanara, Ratnagiri and northwards beyond Bombay along the west coast. Equisetifolia means 'with leaves like Equisetum'. The Australian name, beefwood, refers to the colour of raw meat shown by the wood of the living tree when the bark has been removed. The name Casuarina is said "to be derived from the Latin 'Casuarius' the Cassowary, from the resemblance of the branches to feathers". (Benthall, Tr. Calc. 240).

DESCRIPTION

A large evergreen tree of rapid growth, reaching 30 m. or more in height. The woody branches of the tree end up in green, many-sided branchlets, carrying a number of minute scales at the nodes ; these scales represent the leaves. In general Casuarina looks like a pine tree, though the leaves or needles of the latter are usually shorter than the green branchlets of Casuarina. The flowers are inconspicuous, unisexual, the males in terminal cylindrical spikes, each flower consisting of one stamen and two scales ; the female lowers are small spherical cones, which become woody when ripe ; seeds are winged, very minute and very numerous.

USES

The wood is hard, but in India it is not used for carpentry; it makes good mine props, and one of the best fuel woods. The tree has been very successfully employed in the reclamation of land near the sea, where at the same time it makes an excellent windbreak; after a time other and more useful trees can be planted in the area.

Casuarina is a good garden tree, on which Benthall in Trees of Calcutta writes : "the soft sighing of the air through its innumerable slender twigs is a pleasant sound, reminiscent of

the noise of the sea on a distant shore, and its light open foliage is a pleasant change from the sombre greens of most tropical trees.” For some unknown reason birds do not seem to like Casuarina ; if, therefore, you wish to have birds in your garden or plantation, grow other trees mixed with Casuarina.

CULTIVATION

Sow fresh seeds in a nursery bed, which must be free from water logging; the tree does not do well in clayey soil. Seedlings may be transplanted when about one year old ; they must be planted under the open sky, as they are very sensitive to shading. Casuarina trees may be cut down for fuel after ten years, and should be cut down before they are fifty years old. Old trees often suffer from a fungal infection that blocks the water vessels and causes serious malformations on the trunk, and eventually kills the tree. Although Casuarina is a littoral species, it has been successfully planted in most parts of peninsular India as an avenue tree. But to see this tree in all its glory you must go to the sea coasts of India.

Source:Common Trees by Dr H Santapau, National Book Trust, India. 10th Reprint.