

Cashews

Background

The cashew or Monkey Nut is native to tropical America and north-eastern Brazil in particular. Cashew trees thrive in warm humid climates where there is an annual rainfall greater than 1000 mm and they grow from sea level to an altitude of 1000 m. Cashew is cultivated primarily in India, Brazil, Vietnam, Tanzania and Mozambique. Plantings have also been established in west Africa and Australia.

Cashew trees are robust fast-growing evergreen trees that tolerate periods of drought. The nut that forms at the base of the cashew apple is highly valued as a roasted snack nut, in confectionery, and in cooking, but the apple also has value. Cashew apple juice is a popular drink in many communities and it can be fermented into a Madeira-like wine. The fruit pulp can be made into preserves, jelly, candied fruit and syrup. However, the cashew apple harvested from commercial plantations is discarded when the nut is removed due to lack of markets for apple products. It has been reported that in India alone approximately 1.25 million tonnes of cashew apple is wasted each year.

The liquid enclosed in the shell is called cashew nut shell liquid (CNSL) and it is caustic. It contains cardol and anacardic acid and acts as a vesicant producing burn-like blisters when in contact with human skin. However, CNSL has many industrial uses because of its polymerising and friction-reducing properties. It also has a use as a water-proofing agent and preservative. When distilled and polymerised, the oil is used in varnishes, cements, tiles, lubricants and inks. It has also been used in tropical medicine.

Commercial cashew production in Australia is in its infancy and Cashews Australia is the only commercial plantation at this stage. Planting began in 1989 on the Cashews Australia property near Dimbulah in north Queensland and tree numbers now total approximately 45 000. A second commercial planting is being established at Wildman River in the Northern Territory. Trial plots were first planted in the 1960s and 1970s by private and government interests in Queensland, Northern Territory and Western