

Other tree nuts

Brazil nuts

Brazil nut, *Bertholletia excelsa*, is a member of the Lecythidaceae family and grows in the tropical forests of Amazonia. These Brazil nut forests are known as ‘castanhais’ and occur in the Guianas, Amazonian Brazil, south-eastern Colombia, southern Venezuela, eastern Peru and northern Bolivia. Brazil nut trees are not grown in Australia but as it is an important tree nut on world markets, a brief overview is included in this book.

Brazil nut trees are large deciduous trees growing to 50 m tall and they have a life span of several hundred years. The trees bear leathery leaves and spikes of attractive white flowers that may form large woody ball-shaped fruit containing many tightly packed seeds or Brazil nuts.

Brazil nut flowering occurs during the dry season and extends into the wet season. Toward the end of the rainy season, the leaves of the trees begin to fall. The new foliage grows at the base of the previous year’s flower stems and the new flowers form at the tip of the new growth. Brazil nut flowers open for a couple of hours in the early morning and are pollinated by large insects particularly ‘orchid bees’ that inhabit the forest. Pollinating the flowers involves opening the hood of the flower and few insects are able to do this. It is thought that most seed set is the result of cross-pollination.

After fruit set, a coconut-sized fruit develops over about 15 months. While maturing on the tree, the fruit may be attacked by forest birds but once mature the fruits fall to the ground. Gatherers from forest communities wait until all the fruit has fallen to avoid being hit while working under the trees. Brazil nut fruits weigh between 0.5 and 2.5 kg and have a tough woody outer shell containing between 10 and 25 nuts. The agouti, a large forest-dwelling rodent, has teeth of sufficient strength to open the fruits. Very often the agouti takes the fruit over 400 m from the tree to gnaw through the shell and consume the seeds. The agouti may also bury some seeds and these may grow if they are not consumed before germination. The number of fruits produced by mature trees