Trees Bees Use: Velvet leaf soldierbush

*Heliotropium foertherianum*

Reinhard Fichtl, Weissgerbergraben 5, 93047 Regensburg, Germany

Keywords: Africa, Asia, bee forage, honey production, Pacific

**Family** Boraginaceae

*Heliotropium foertherianum* is an important source of nectar and is recommended for honey production.

**Description**

An erect shrub or small to medium-sized spreading tree growing up to 5 m high. The bark is light brown to grey, deeply corrugated. Leaves are light green, silky, pubescent, with a silvery grey sheen, obovate to oblanceolate, simple and alternate, and spirally arranged at the tips of branches. The flowers are small and white, arranged in multi-branched, terminal, paniculate cymes. Fruit is greenish-white to brown and globose, with two to four seeds enclosed in a corky tissue. *Heliotropium foertherianum* flowers throughout the year.

**Distribution**

*Heliotropium foertherianum* occurs in equatorial to subtropical maritime climates of the Indian and Pacific oceans as a strand shrub or tree of sandy or rocky shores, often found near to the water’s edge, on sandy beaches and rocky coral limestone slopes where soils are very thin.

The tree can be found growing in Australia, China, Cook Islands, Fiji, French Polynesia, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Marshall Islands, Mauritius, Micronesia, Mozambique, New Caledonia, Niue, northern Mariana Islands, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Samoa, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Tanzania, Tonga and Vietnam.

**Practical notes**

Slow growing *Heliotropium foertherianum* tolerates salt spray and can grow close to the ocean, even surviving occasional waves washing over its roots. It is also resilient in drought conditions. The tree is easily propagated by seeds, cuttings, or air-layering.

**Uses**

*Heliotropium foertherianum* is an attractive ornamental tree in home gardens or along streets. It is also an excellent stabiliser of shorelines, offers good protection against the wind and provides a salt spray barrier. The tree is an important provider of nesting sites for many ocean birds.

*Leaves* provide abundant mulch on atolls and are often eaten as a vegetable, especially in India and Kiribati. They also provide fodder for pigs, particularly throughout Micronesia. The leaves are widely used in traditional medicines and rituals, from curing rashes and diarrhoea, to medicinal teas, steam baths, and to stop bleeding and cover bruises. They are also used to cure diseases caused by the violation of sea taboos. The leaves are used for fish poisoning in Nauru and as bait in Tokelau.

*The wood* is used for house construction, making canoe parts, handicraft items, knife and other tool handles, canoe bailers, and unfortunately, as an important source of firewood.

*Loaves* provide abundant mulch on atolls and are often eaten as a vegetable, especially in India and Kiribati.