Easy Reference Sheet

Browse Harvesting for Wildlife Carers

The collection of foliage (also commonly referred to as 'browse' or 'leaf') plays an essential part in the rehabilitation of many of our native wildlife.

In order for the animals in your care to gain the most nutritional value from what you collect, here are a few guidelines.

A few tips on leaf collection:

- Never pick leaf close to a road. Exhaust fumes and dust from roads settle on and are absorbed by leaves. Always walk 20-30m into the bush.
- Always use a sharp pair of secateurs when cutting branches (do not pull/rip branches). This will encourage re-growth and ensure the possibility of future harvesting.
- Cut branches at a 45° angle to encourage new growth.
- Cut branches with both new and old growth. Do not just cut the fresh tip section of the branch. All species will eat some older leaf and, at certain times, they will prefer the older leaf to the newer tip.
- Species such as possums, will relish the entire branch including the leaves, buds, flowers, fruits, seeds, and bark (for chewing and stripping).
- Harvest sustainably on a rotational basis, without jeopardising native regrowth itself (as it will one day be habitat for more animals). Only take the tops off regrowth (especially eucalypts) when they are growing underneath power lines or along easements, where they get regularly cleared by Council or Energex and will not be given the chance to mature into tall trees anyway. In areas where regrowth is trying to establish, only take small sections of side branches, so that the tree can continue to grow in a healthy form.
- Do not cut browse if plants and grasses in the area are wilting/dying. This may indicate that poisons have recently been sprayed in the area. Pay attention to your favourite leaf-cutting locations. If you notice Council working in the area, there is a chance that they could be spraying toxic substances to control weeds.
- Ensure that you are aware of plants that may be toxic to some wildlife. Toxic plants include: *Allamanda* spp., Agapanthus, Oleander, Lantana, Mother-of-Millions, plants in the family Araceae including *Alocasia* spp, *Dieffenbachia* spp., *Monstera* spp., *Philodendron* spp., Poinsettia, the nightshades, privets, lilies, daturas, Dutchman's pipe, Camphor Laurel and *Cestrum* spp. (Source: Wilson, Sally Some Plants are Poisonous. Reed, 1997. Toxic Plants and Animals: A Guide for Australia. Queensland Museum, 1987)
- To transport the branches home lay them on a clean sheet that is used for this purpose only. Possums and koalas particularly have an acute sense of smell and they always smell their food before taking a bite. If you put the branches on the car seat where your dog sat last week, chances are they will not touch it, because it smells of a predator.
- Try to cut early in the morning or late in the afternoon; avoid cutting in the middle of the day particularly during hot weather.
- In hot weather (if your car will accommodate it), place a bucket containing a small amount of water in your car so that you can place the branches straight into water. This will ensure that the browse stays fresh. The floor of your car between the back of the front seat and the back seat is a good place to wedge a bucket.
- Once you arrive home, arrange the branches in buckets filled with fresh water (roughly one quarter to one third of the depth of the bucket) and store it in a cool position out of the sun.
- Buckets that are used for browse should be kept solely for this purpose and marked LEAF ONLY to prevent them from being used by someone else in the household (usually the man in the house!)

- Ideally leaf should be picked fresh daily but in cooler weather it is sometimes possible to pick leaf for two days at a time. It is believed that toxin levels in many species increase as the leaf ages after being cut and you will find that beyond two to three days not all of your leaf tip will be eaten. Some species of leaf tends to keep fresher than others.
- When cutting and carrying leaf, make sure that you do not have insect repellent or strong perfume or moisturiser on your skin, as the smell may be transferred to the leaf. This could be toxic to your animals or at the very least, your animals will be unlikely to eat it.
- Do not cut too much leaf, as this is a waste of a precious resource.

Some safety considerations:-

There are some health and safety aspects that should be considered when cutting browse:-

- Always wear long pants and well-covered shoes when walking through bush
- If you will be walking a little distance from your car (and hence your mobile phone) – take your phone with you
- If cutting in a remote area, always make sure that someone knows where you are
- Place a carabiner clip on your key ring and secure it to your pants to prevent losing your keys in the bush (or secure onto a lanyard around your neck)
- Keep a snake bite kit in your car
- Be aware that walking in the bush will expose you to creepy crawlies such as ticks and leeches. There are also a lot of bugs that live in and on the branches – these are great for species such as gliders to nibble on but not so great when they nibble on you! Some have the potential to cause side-effects so always keep leaf well away from your face and neck.

Where can I cut leaf?

- You cannot cut browse from National Parks or conservation areas
- Under Council laws, it is illegal to harm or remove Council vegetation. Some wildlife carers have been caught doing this by Council workers and they could potentially face penalties.
- Be respectful – do not cut from areas that are undergoing revegetation. Land care community volunteers spend hundreds of hours (and a lot of money) rejuvenating these areas. The harvesting of saplings causes irreversible damage to the long-term structure of the tree, which often results in them having to be removed and replaced.
- Check with your local Council as to whether they have 'fodder farms' specifically for wildlife carers. Many of the Councils in the South-east Queensland region have provided such facilities.

Browse Harvesting Equipment

If you are cutting a reasonable quantity of leaf, invest in a good pair of secateurs (they will last longer and you will generally be more comfortable). If you have trouble cutting strong branches, purchase a pair of secateurs with a 'ratchet' mechanism.

If you are cutting longer lengths of leaf (for pre-release stage and koalas) you may want to consider investing in a pair of ratchet-style telescopic cutters and/or extendable tree loppers.

References: Wildlife Habitat and Native Plant Identification (Lyons, R – Wildcare Australia Inc)

Possums of South-east Queensland (Hanger, E – Wildcare Australia Inc)

Contributors: Rachel Lyons, Eleanor Hanger and Karen Scott