

Trees that nobody loves: weedy guitars

Description

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Guitar by Karl Venz, Queensland, using entirely locally-sourced weedy trees

Non-native plants can cause big problems everywhere, but are not always bad and can be put to use – guitars made from problem weeds

Weeds: plants in the wrong place

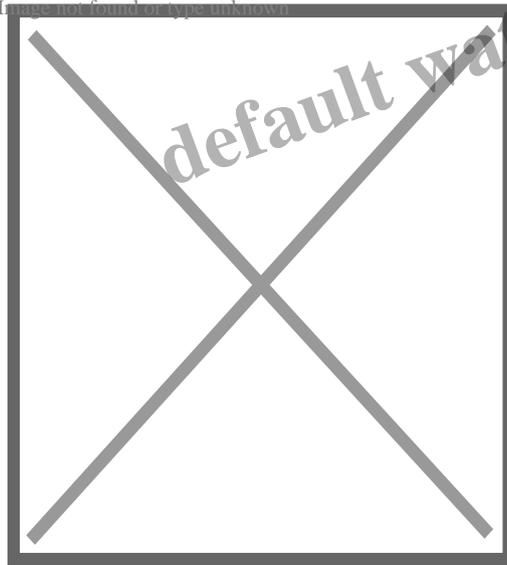
A [recent post](#) focused on my quest for a guitar made entirely from Australian timbers. The guitar made by [Aaron Fenech](#) featuring Wandoo wood from here in Western Australia is certainly a magnificent guitar in all regards. There is much more to be said about native Australian woods in later posts. However, here I want to flip the narrative and look at guitars made from species that are not native to Australia and are, in fact, considered weedy pest species.

Everybody knows about weeds. They're the pesky plants that grow where they are not wanted – in the garden, in the vegetable beds, in lawns, in cracks in the sidewalk. Just about anywhere really. Agricultural weeds grow amongst crops and reduce the productivity of the crop. Weeds in pastures can poison stock or cover them in nasty burs and prickles. And weeds in natural areas take up space and resources that would otherwise be used by native species.

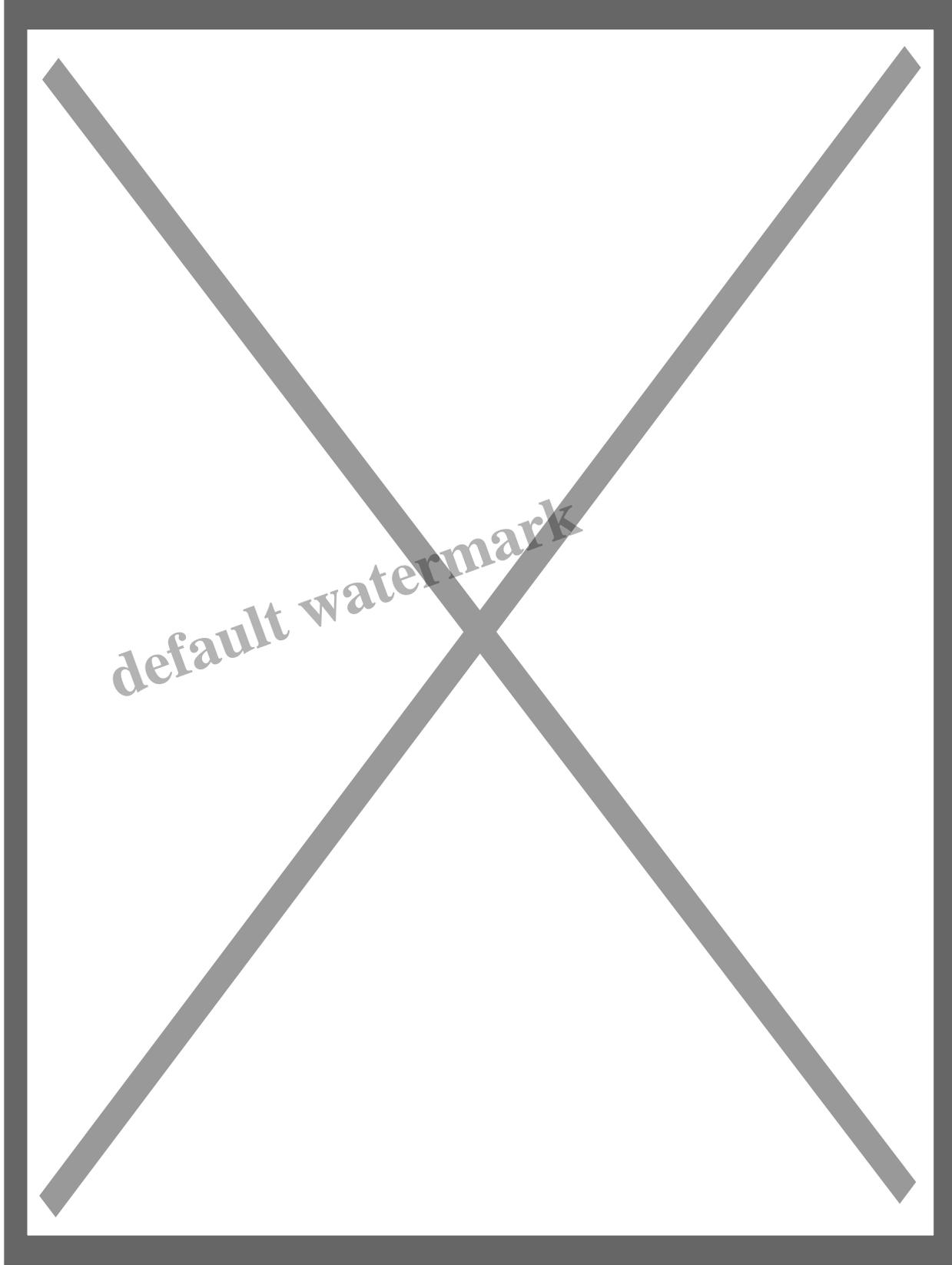
People generally dislike weeds. For some, dislike verges on hate. Huge amounts of time, effort and money are spent trying to get rid of weeds wherever they occur. Physically pulling them out, spraying them with herbicide, blasting them with steam – war is waged on weeds on many fronts and in many ways.

And yet, in some ways weeds are quite remarkable. Gardeners often lament that the weeds grow much better than the plants they want to grow. Weeds can tolerate and thrive in conditions that seem entirely uncondusive to plant growth. Leave any human-made structure alone too long and weeds start taking over. The characteristics of “weediness” are usually hardiness, fast growth and quick and prolific flowering which leads to lots of seeds which often have specialised modes of transport that disperse them into new areas.

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Dandelions can grow pretty much anywhere. Source: [memedroid](#)

The dandelion is the quintessential weed. Grows virtually anywhere, develops a big tuberous root that is hard to pull out and allows leaves to regrow after removal, has lots of yellow flowers and makes huge numbers of seeds that are carried on the wind. But the dandelion is not always considered a pest, and does have its uses.

[A GROWING CONCERN: An homage to the humble dandelion](#)

Recently the resilient features of the humble dandelion have been used as a metaphor for human resistance to injustice – *The Dandelion Insurrection* by Rivera Sun tells the story of a quiet revolution driven by non-violent protest against government corruption and oppression. The message is:

*"Be like the dandelions,
spring up in intolerable soils,
dare to stand up against violence,
and blossom into love!"*

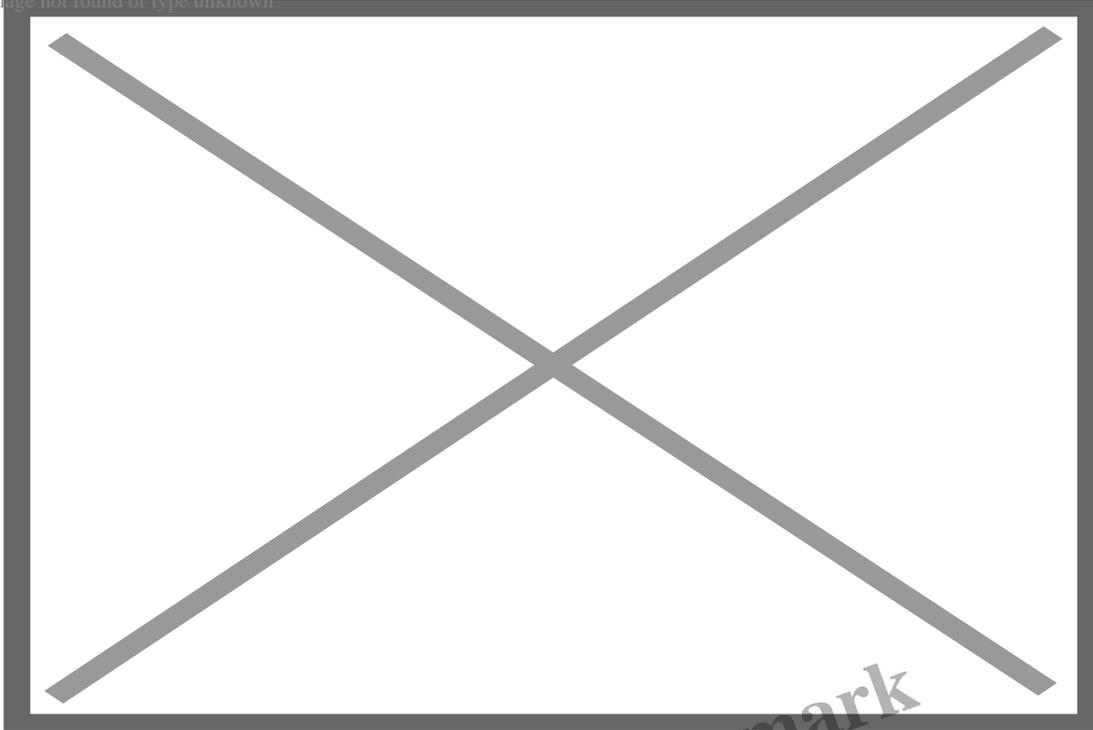
Invasive species

In my career as an ecologist focusing on conservation and restoration science and practice, I spent a lot of my time working on weeds. Weeds fall under the more general term “invasive species”. Plants are considered to be invasive if they occur where they are not supposed to be (“A weed is simply a plant in the wrong place”). There are also all sorts of animals, insects and microorganisms that are also categorised as invasive species.

Throughout history, humans have shown a great propensity for moving species around the world – either accidentally or on purpose. Most crops and livestock come from somewhere else in the world. Most garden plants, domestic animals and aquarium fish too. Especially during colonial times, European colonists liked taking European species with them and releasing them in the colonized environments. And a lot of other species “hitchhiked” their way to different parts of the world – on ships, in shipped goods or packaging or in ballast water.

Many of the species moved to new places either didn’t survive or were well-behaved and fulfilled the function they were brought for – crops, livestock, garden plants and so on. Quite a lot of species were less well-behaved, however. Unruly species of all types spread extensively and created havoc in both agriculture and the natural environment.

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Aggressive newcomer plants can completely take over the neighborhood.

Source: [Queensland Government](#)

Invasive plant species spread into natural areas, sometimes completely taking over the place and smothering native species, and sometimes more subtly altering species interactions and changing the ecosystem and the way it works. In some parts of the world, invasive animals have eaten or stomped their way through the landscape and completely transformed habitats and animal assemblages. Here in Australia, for example, rabbits chewed their way across the continent, and foxes and feral cats have done a number on lots of native animals, many of which are now either completely gone or reduced to a tiny fraction of their former ranges.

Because of their impacts and ongoing threats to native plants and wildlife, invasive species are the focus of a lot of conservation policy and management. Quite a bit of this considers how to deal with invasive species that are present in particular places. These are problems that have already arrived. And there are plenty of these in most parts of the world – often too many to deal with effectively, given the levels of resourcing usually available for the job.

But there is also a whole side to the invasive species picture that looks at the “supply side” – how species get into new places in the first place and how that might be prevented and hence reduce future problems. Quarantine and biosecurity are the most prominent of these measures – aiming to stop problem organisms at the border. Obviously, this issue is front and central at the moment with the spread of COVID-19 – the countries that have had the most successful responses to the pandemic are largely those that have enforced hard border closures and strict quarantine measures. But the same thinking can apply to invasive organisms of all types. And there is plenty that can be done in this arena.

Weeds aren't inherently evil

Even if measures to prevent species spreading and invading new areas are successful, there are still a truck-load of species already established and part of the local scene. These species aren't inherently evil – humans helped them move around in the first place, and they're just doing what they are designed to do. Sometimes folks like what they do but often they hate it.

A Weed is a Flower in the Wrong Place. [Ian Emberson](#) (1936–2013)

*A weed is a flower in the wrong place,
a flower is a weed in the right place,
if you were a weed in the right place
you would be a flower;
but seeing as you're a weed in the wrong place
you're only a weed -
it's high time someone pulled you out.*

I managed to get myself in hot water (again!) in my professional career by joining a group of scientists questioning the relentless pursuit of eradicating or controlling all species that are not native in a particular area. We weren't saying "Don't do it!", but rather "Let's pause and think about what we're doing and whether it makes sense".

While there is no dispute that some species can and do cause a lot of damage to things we care about, there are also many species that have been moved to new homes and behave nicely there. Some species just simply stay where they are put and don't spread and don't cause problems for other species or the ecosystem as a whole. In addition, some species may also even be beneficial in some ways – there are lots of examples of plant species that, for instance, help reduce soil erosion or sand blowing by binding the soil when nothing else will. Or plants that act as alternative food sources or shelter for native species.

Once a plant is in an ecosystem, it develops networks of connections with the other species present. Some of those connections may be negative and some may be positive. And this is likely to vary from place to place – a plant can be a problem in one location or ecosystem but quite benign or even beneficial in another. This then starts leading to conservation conundrums. The aim may be to maintain a native species assemblage by removing the non-native species. But removing the non-native species may have unexpected impacts on some of the native species that people want to conserve. Conservation decisions are increasingly tricky in today's world! Beware of people who have simple answers to complex questions.

“Is this one a flower or a weed? I’m not sure whether to admire it or not.”

I can never tell the plants from the weeds! Pull them all up and the ones that grow again are the weeds!

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‘This one’s so beautiful it almost seems a shame to pull it out...’

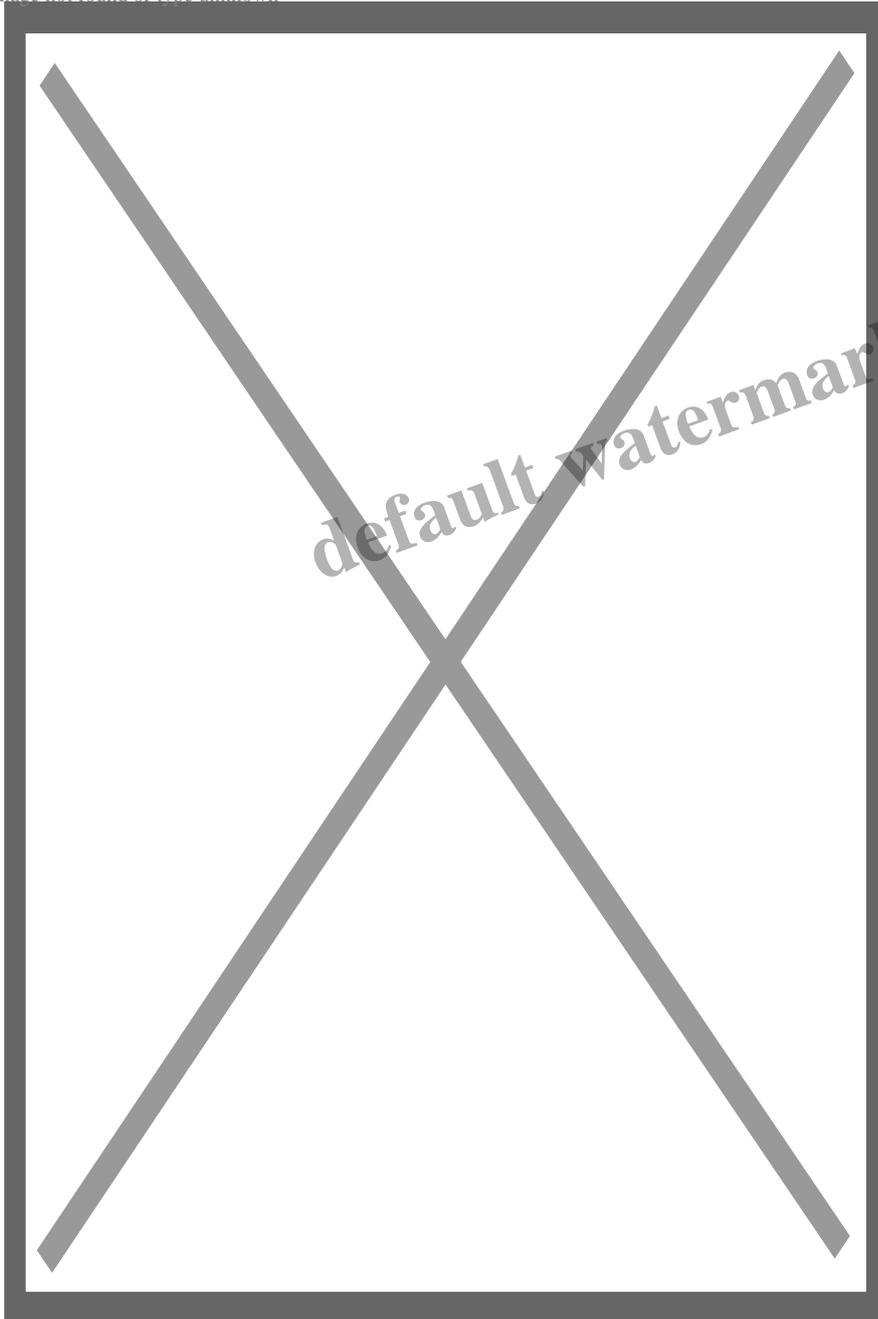
The bottom line is that the old black and white view of invasive species – native species are good and non-native species are bad – simply doesn’t work anymore. This is a hard pill to swallow for hard-working conservation and restoration folks who have been imbued with the worldview that one of the most important tasks they have to do is to get rid of invasive species at all costs. Unfortunately, in some situations the means have become the ends – weed removal and control has become the primary focus, with little consideration of why the weeds have to be removed or what happens once they are removed.

In most cases, without follow-up restoration work or ongoing management, removing weeds will simply result in more weeds appearing. Often the presence of weeds represents a symptom of more fundamental ecosystem degradation, and unless that is addressed, waging war on the weeds themselves is unlikely to be successful.

Camphor laurel

If any of my conservation and restoration colleagues are reading this, the very sight of the name camphor laurel may well have sent them into a frothing frenzy. It's one of those plants that many people hate with a passion. Native in Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam and China, [Camphor laurel](#) (*Cinnamomum camphora*) was first introduced into Australia in 1822 and promoted as a shade tree. Now, however, it is highly invasive, aggressively replacing pasture and native vegetation, and it's hard – and expensive – to get rid of. It's recognised as a problem weed in eastern Australia and in other parts of the world.

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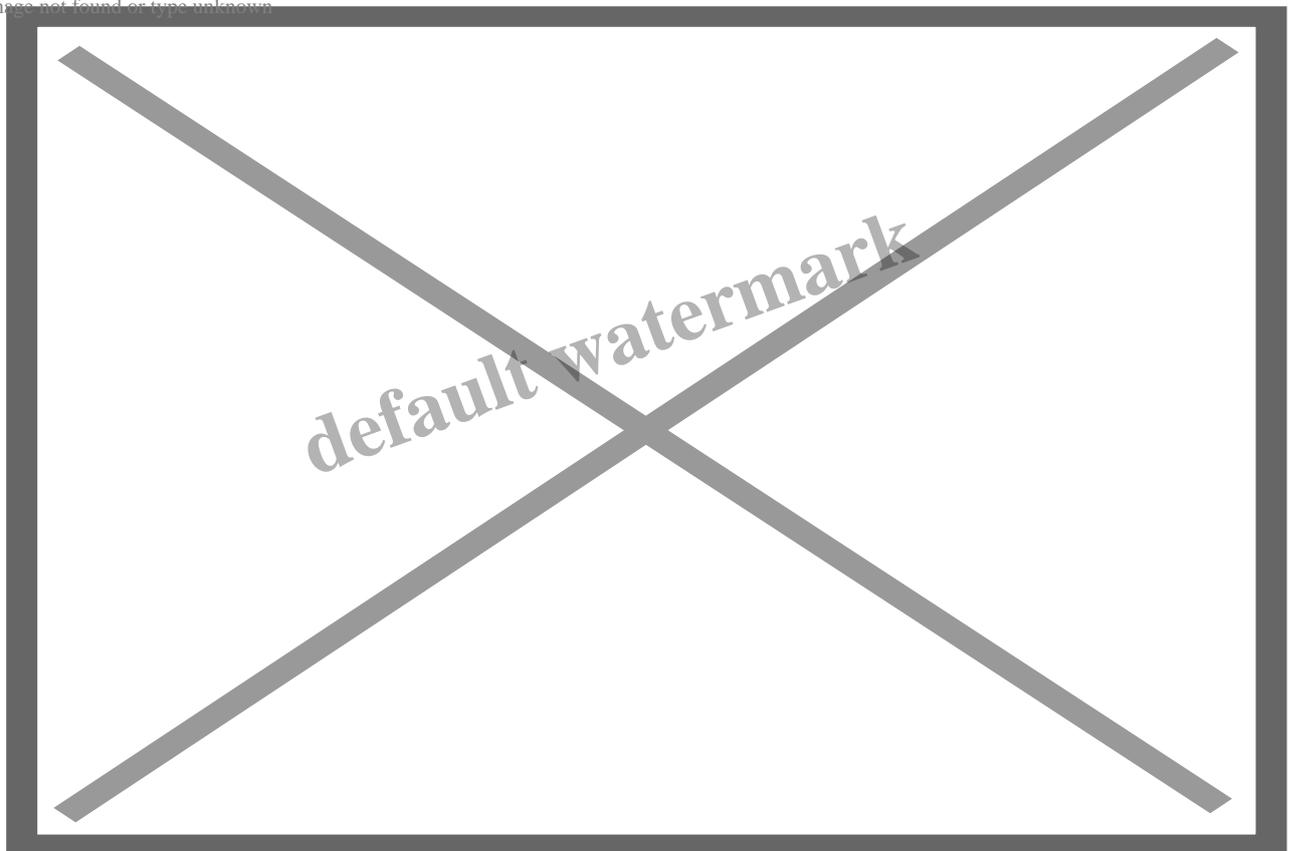
Mature Camphor Laurel. Photo: [Bob Gibbons, Science Photo Library](#)

If left to grow, camphor laurels can live for hundreds of years and become a tree up to 100 feet in

height and with a dense crown that contributes to the shady, leafy appearance city-scapes in which they grow. Some people are very attached to the camphor laurels in their streets, and they certainly provide amenity – and to some extent add to the local sense of place.

The tree produces camphor oil which is used as an insect repellent and in medicines – for instance, it is one of the ingredients in [Vicks Vaporub](#) – a part of childhood for anyone growing up in Scotland. The timber it produces is also quite attractive and workable. Hence, camphor laurel is both despised and loved, depending on the context. In that regard, it's similar to many other non-native plants – Janus-faced, with one face smiling and the other evil. How this plays out in particular cases is perhaps best illustrated in the story of the so-called "[camphor laurel war](#)" in Bellingen, New South Wales in 2010-2011.

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The proposed removal of mature camphor laurels in Bellingen caused intense debate in the local community. Photo: [Bruce Jacups](#)

“When five large camphor laurel trees were slated for removal from the café strip in my hometown of Bellingen, NSW, a passionate conflict broke out and the weight of meaning given to these specimens soon boiled to the surface. Those who wanted to keep the trees railed against the wanton destruction of history, the removal of vital shade and local character. Those who thought they should be removed asked how Bellingen could claim to be a town of environmentalists when it had noxious weeds spreading seeds from its civic heart. Some people felt that if we were to lose the trees the town would change forever.”

The camphor conflict engrossed the town for years, invoking lively debate about how we engage with the natural world and construct meaning from the inhabitants that share our space.

Were these trees a valuable part of Bellinghen's ecology? According to one interpretation, camphor laurels are invasive aliens in the valley, colonists spewing poisons into the soil and intoxicating native birdlife.

According to the other side, these trees were part of an adaptive future, standing strong in the era of climate change; when any tree is a good tree. According to this view, the camphors were part of the hybrid future of nature, providing habitat for staghorns, rainforest epiphytes and nesting birds. "Why get rid of these few when there are millions of them by the river". Even Bellinghen's environmentalists were split on this part of the debate, I overheard someone on the street point out the debate had flipped the usual order: "half the greenies want to chop the trees down and the rednecks are actively campaigning to keep them!"

[Bede Brennan](#), 2020

The controversy in Bellinghen was brilliantly captured in an essay "[Heritage Weeds in Latteland: An essay on camphor laurels, coffee, democracy, streetscape, tourism and Bellinghen](#)" written by Ross Macleay in 2011.

He outlines in detail the passionate arguments put forward both for and against the camphor laurels. "The camphors were either living monuments or monumental weeds", depending on who you talked to or who was writing letters to the local newspaper. He details the history of camphor laurel introduction to the area – with a quote from one of the early settlers who established a large landscape garden: "*The native bush was retained and planted with exotics to enhance its botanical interest*". That summed up the early colonial approach to the native ecosystems – full of strange unfamiliar plants and in need of tizzying up with a bunch of other stuff. And he talks about all the historical and cultural contexts surrounding the street trees in Bellinghen and the angst caused by the decision to remove them.

In the end, the trees were removed, and replaced by more acceptable species which will one day undoubtedly be just as grand as the old camphor laurels. But the battle for Bellinghen is a vignette of similar debates and conservation conundrums being played out in many different parts of the world.

The ambivalence over camphor laurels extends beyond the streets of Bellinghen. While it undoubtedly causes huge problems in intact native rainforest, it may actually be unexpectedly beneficial in the efforts to restore already cleared or degraded areas, as discussed by ecologist, writer and artist, [Paula Peeters](#), below.

*...But some of the most-hated weeds such as lantana (*Lantana camara*) which smothers native vegetation, and is linked to eucalypt dieback, also provides food and shelter for birds and other creatures. The spread of the exotic, fruit-bearing tree camphor laurel (*Cinnamomum camphora*) is also a double-edged sword. Invasion of intact rainforest by camphor laurel is certainly not desirable. But in the highly-cleared landscapes of south-east*

Queensland and northern New South Wales this weedy tree is helping native rainforest species return to degraded lands. Camphor laurel can establish in open areas where many native rainforest trees find it difficult to get a foothold. Once there, camphor laurel trees attract native fruit-eating birds, who carry in and drop the seeds of native plant species. These native plants grow up underneath the camphor laurel trees where they are shaded, and protected from frosts and drying winds. The camphor laurels can then be killed by stem injection of herbicide, and left as dead trees to provide perches for fruit-eating birds, who can continue to drop seeds. As long as competing camphor laurel seedlings and other weeds are regularly controlled, this method can be highly successful in returning rainforest to oldfields, and is also much cheaper than clearing and replanting with natives

[Paula Peeters](#)

A camphor laurel guitar

Why, you might ask, am I spending so much time rabbiting on about a big woody weed? Well, as you might have guessed by now, there is a guitar involved.

I first encountered camphor laurel wood at a weekend market in Canberra while over visiting our son there. One of the stall holders was selling an amazing selection of chopping boards and platters, all made from camphor laurel. They were manufactured by an outfit called Eco Food Boards, based in Byron Bay, and their website outlines their rationale for using camphor laurel for their boards.

“Eco Food Boards is based in the unsurpassed beauty of Byron Bay and as such caring for our environment and being sustainable is paramount to us. Now as much we love the timber for our magnificent boards, as a tree the Camphor Laurel is a pest and considered a weed in our area. By using this tree exclusively for our boards, we are helping native flora replenish itself as their presence on the land hinders native growth.

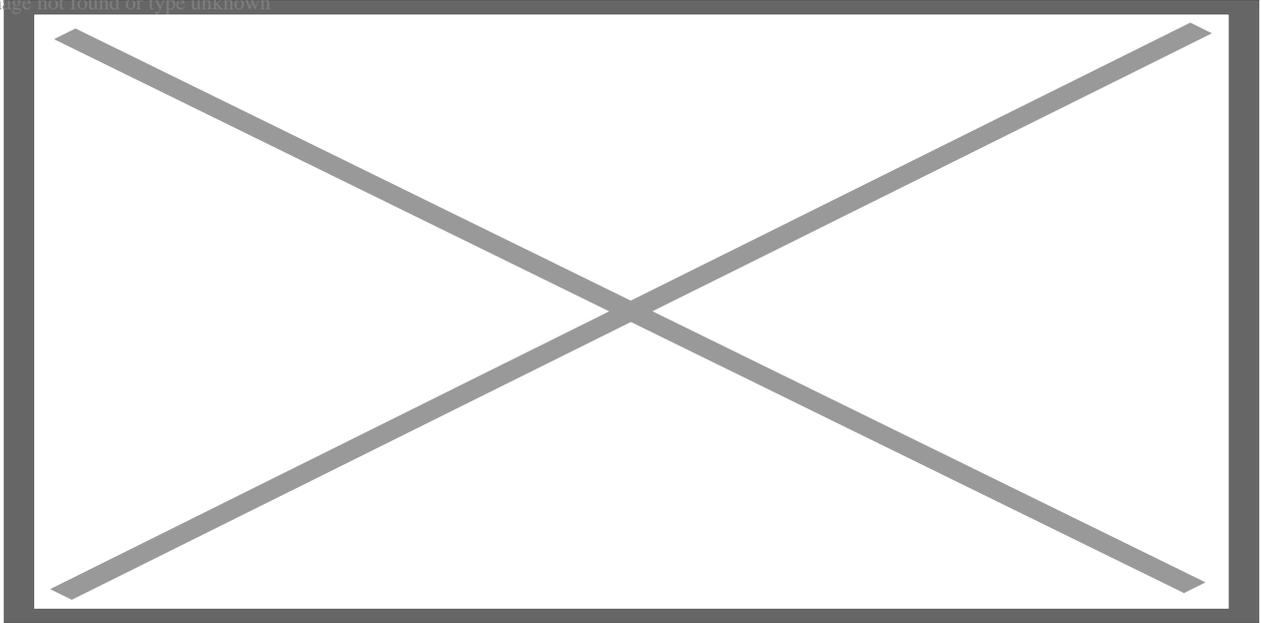
We use trees from Murwillumbah to Lismore. When a local farmer is told to remove a tree, our talented manager is jumps in the truck and removes the hewn logs. Not only do we remove the logs we also pay the farmer to help offset their clearing costs.

Native plants can once again grow, you get a gorgeous food board and a local farmer is a happy chap once again. Win. Win.

But wait...there's more! The offcuts from the boards are bundled up and offered free as firewood for anyone who wants to pop in. Also available is sawdust to show the veggie patch some love or to freshen up a compost toilet.

[Eco food Boards](#), Byron Bay

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I liked the underlying idea that, rather than simply viewing camphor laurel as a pest to be got rid of at all costs, it could also perhaps provide a useful resource – and this in turn could help support ongoing control and restoration efforts. On the flight back to Perth, with one of their camphor laurel platters safely packed in my suitcase, I mused whether anyone was using camphor laurel as a guitar wood.

When I got back home I did some Google sleuthing, and came up with [Jens Ploesser](#), a Canberra luthier, who had used camphor laurel to good effect. I also found an advert for a parlor guitar with camphor laurel back and sides, made by Karl Venz from Makersville, a now-closed artists' collective in Montville, Queensland.

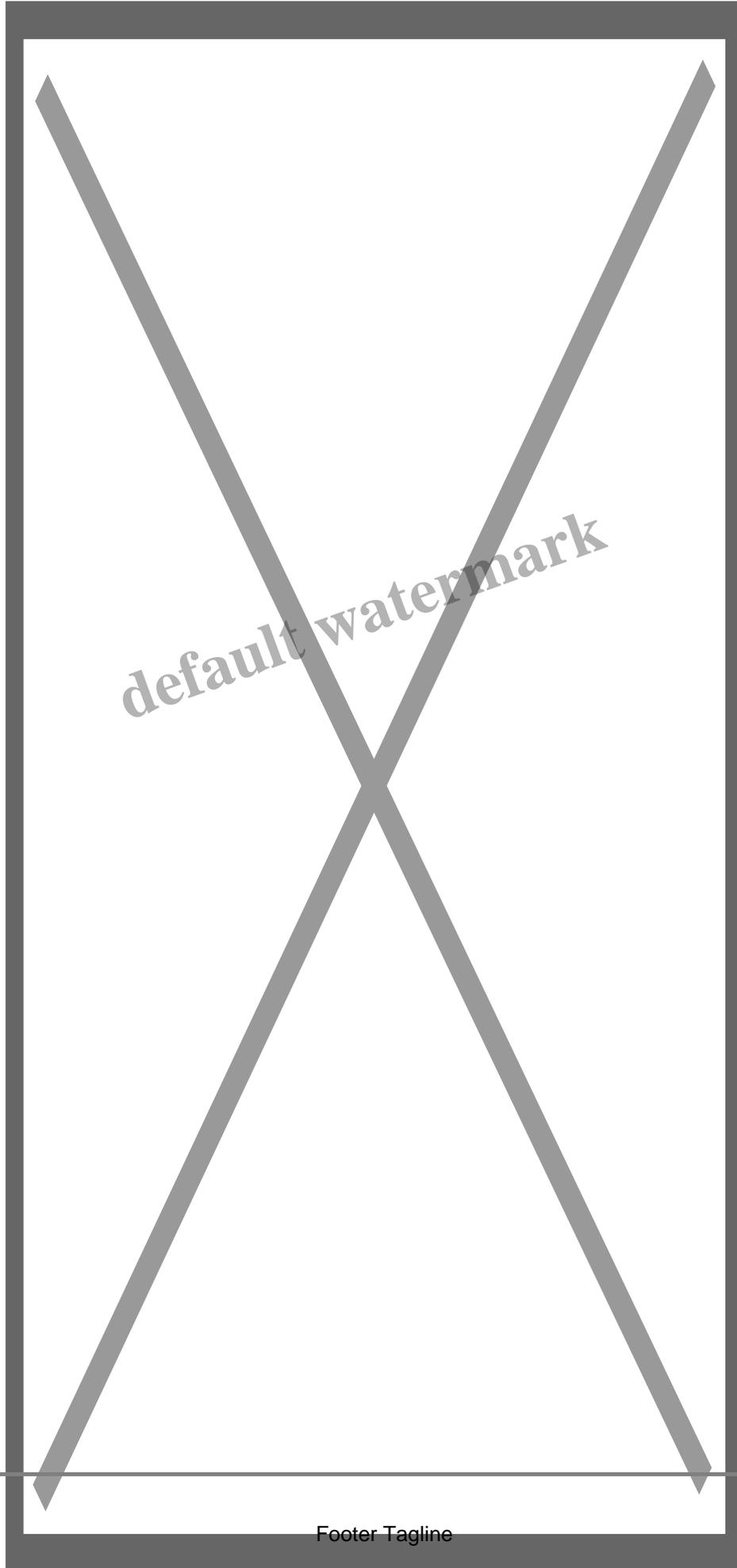
The guitars for sale at Makersville looked interesting, and I talked myself into ordering the little camphor laurel guitar. I was interested to see whether wood from a seriously weedy tree made anything approaching a good guitar. Buying a guitar sight-unseen over the internet, made by someone you've never heard of, is probably regarded as foolish by many people. But when it arrived in the post a week or so later, I was completely blown away by the little instrument.

Whoever Karl Venz was, he certainly knew how to make a good-sounding guitar. For a small parlor size, it made a lot of noise, had excellent tone and was a joy to play.

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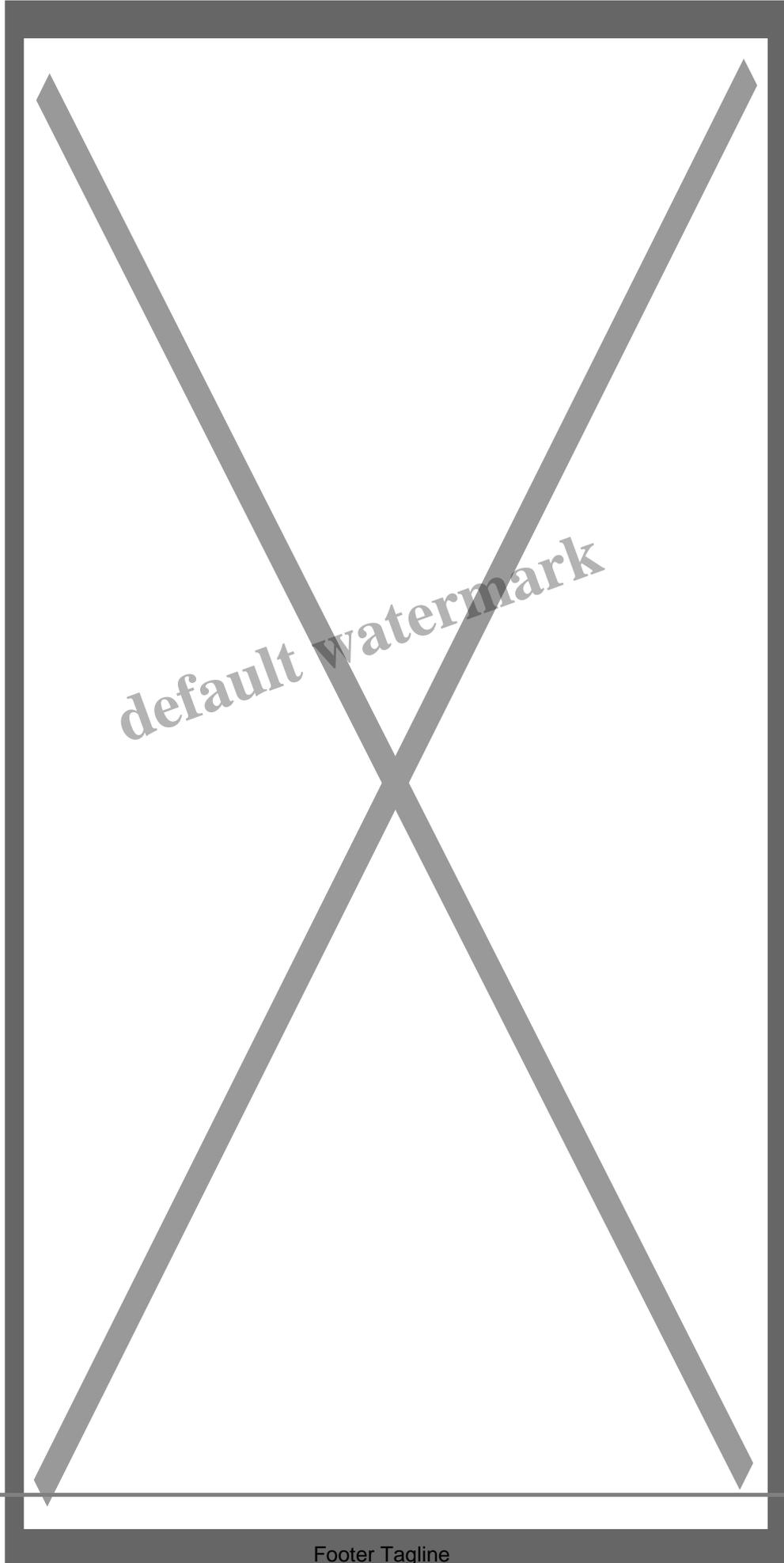
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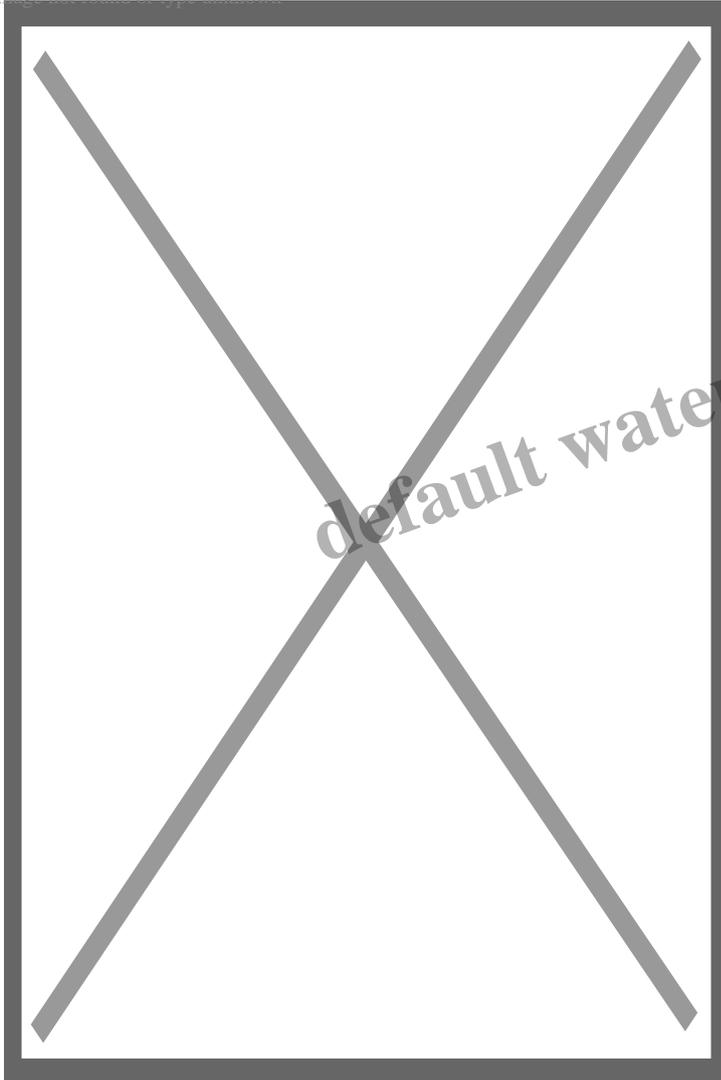


Karl Venz parlor guitar – Hoop Pine top, Camphor Laurel back and sides

Karl Venz – making guitars from tree to guitar

You'd be hard pressed to find any information about Karl Venz on the internet. He doesn't have a website or a Facebook page. I managed to get in contact with him through the Makersville outlet. He lives on a rural property near a town called Amamoor, just outside Gympie in Queensland. I gave him a call and we had a good chat about how he got into guitar making and how he selects his materials.

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Karl Venz

Karl worked in the building industry most of his life and so had an appreciation for working with timber. He's basically a self-taught guitar maker, learning the ropes via a video course and the associated books. When he began guitar building he wanted to use as much of the local timbers as possible, and this meant experimenting with some timbers not commonly associated with guitars such as Camphor Laurel, Jacaranda, and Hoop Pine, and also some hardwoods such as Gympie Messmate and She Oak.

He's discovered that some of these timbers have exceptional acoustic qualities and they also make beautiful looking guitars. Most of the timber is sourced in his local area and, if necessary, he also fells the trees and mills them using his small bandsaw mill. As he says, "I do everything from tree to guitar". He also uses local cattle bone from properties here to make the nuts and saddles.

He's made quite a range of guitars using a variety of woods. Most get sold via word of mouth.

A truly weedy guitar?

The camphor laurel guitar had a top made from Hoop Pine and also used a number of other Australian native timbers (Gidgee, Queensland Rosewood and She Oak) and woods originating from elsewhere (New Guinea Rosewood and South American Purple Heart).

While chatting to Karl about his selection of materials, a question flashed into my mind. Would it be possible to make a guitar entirely from tree species that are weedy in his part of Australia? I'd done the reverse process with Aaron Fenech, asking him if he could make a guitar entirely from Australian native species (interestingly, Aaron has also recently used camphor laurel on one of his [guitars](#)). Partly, my interest in a full-on weedy guitar stemmed from my professional experiences of outrage surrounding the suggestion that we shouldn't automatically label all non-native species as bad and in need of a good purge.

I asked Karl whether a completely weedy guitar could be possible, and he said that he'd have a think about it. We exchanged a couple of emails in which he mused over species that might work. And then I didn't hear anything else for 5-6 months, and I assumed he'd been busy with other stuff and forgotten about the idea.

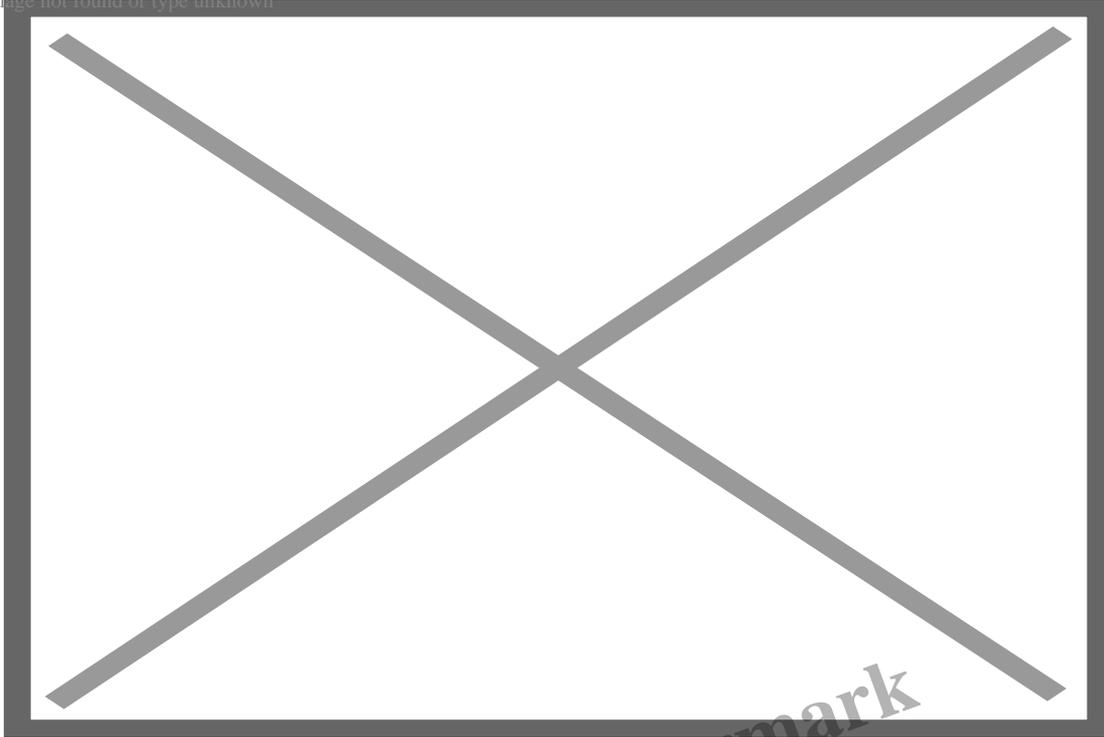
Ha! Couldn't have been more wrong! An email from Karl popped into my inbox with photos of a guitar he'd been making using the guideline "only wood from non-native weedy species". He used [Jacaranda](#) for back, sides and neck, Paulownia for soundboard and Privet for the fretboard and bindings with Camphor Laurel rosette and headstock veneer. While Jacaranda is noted as a beautiful street tree in some places, including where I live, it is also a [problem weed](#) in Queensland. Similarly, [Paulownia](#) is a pretty flowering tree that also has a darker, invasive side in many parts of eastern Australia, as has [Privet](#).

Karl Venz camphor laurel guitar on the left and full-on weed guitar on the right

Karl had made the guitar pretty much to satisfy his own curiosity, and didn't seem to expect me to want to buy it. But, encouraged by the quality of the little camphor laurel guitar, naturally I couldn't resist. It's another outstanding guitar, slightly larger than the parlor (maybe about a 00 size), with the same unstained, satin finish that allows the natural characteristics of the wood to show through.

I can safely say that, yes, it is possible – at least for Karl – to make an excellent guitar using woods from trees that nobody loves.

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Update 23 May 2021: Karl was recently featured in [ABC's Landline program](#): the segment on Karl starts at 25:40.

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1. Uncategorized

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