Cathay silver fir – an update

Following the article published in the 2006 yearbook
CHRIS CALLAGHAN has sent photos of *Cathaya argyrophylla* flowering in cultivation, outside China.

Something very interesting occurred recently at the Australian Bicentennial Arboretum.

A seven year old plant of *Cathaya argyrophylla* bore ten male flowers in September 2008, these then appearing like small 1.25cm long female cones with spiralling scales.

By late November, these "cones" had elongated into 4cm spike-like male catkins to disperse their pollen.

Even more remarkable was that at the same time another 11 year-old

Above Immature male stobili on seven year old *Cathaya argyrophylla*.

Right Erect spike-like male catkin of seven year old *Cathaya argyrophylla* extended to disperse pollen.

Cathaya was bearing more than 50 juvenile female strobili, and had in fact born about a dozen of these the previous year.

Juvenile female cones on 11 year-old *Cathaya argyrophylla* before fertilization.

In 1982, Tang Xiyang wrote in his subsequently published article "The Secret Cathay Silver Fir", that "only recently did the first generation of cultivated Cathay silver firs bear four male flowers, so only then did they" (the Chinese *Cathaya argyrophylla* Study Group in Guangxi) "learn that the Cathay silver fir takes as long as 17 years to mature. But when the same tree will bear female flowers and when it will bear fruit and produce the next generation of Cathay silver firs is so far nature's secret."

In view of the above it was surprising to see the arboretum's cathayas flowering unexpectedly at so young an age.

Hence it is possible that the plants at this arboretum are not only the youngest to flower, but also the first Cathay silver firs to flower outside of China, the genus having only been established in cultivation elsewhere about 13 years so far.

Unfortunately the female strobili were not cross-pollinated, possibly due to the distance between these two flowering cathayas, and hence no mature cones resulted. We shall keep our fingers crossed for our next spring later this year.