

Abutilon theophrasti

[Synonyms : *Abutilon abutilon*, *Abutilon avicennae*, *Abutilon avicennae* var. *chinense*, *Abutilon avicennae* forma *nigrum*, *Abutilon californicum*, *Abutilon pubescens*, *Abutilon theophrasti* var. *chinense*, *Abutilon theophrasti* var. *nigrum*, *Malva abutilon*, *Abutilon tiliaefolium*, *Abutilon tiliifolium*, *Sida abutilon*, *Sida avicennae*, *Sida tiliaefolia*, *Sida tiliifolia*]

VELVET LEAF is an annual. Native to Asia (including Bengal, China and north-western India) and southern Europe, it has velvety green leaves and small yellow flowers.

It is also known as *Abu taylun* (Arabic), *Abutilonhamp* (Danish), *Abutilonhanf* (German), *Abutilon hemp*, *Abutilonhennep* (Dutch), *Abutilon ordinaire* (French), *Abutilo ordinario* (Italian), *American hemp*, *American jute*, *American velvet leaf*, *Bai ma* (Chinese), *Baržunovec* (Slovenian), *Bastardeibish* (German), *Butter print*, *Butterprint velvetleaf*, *Butter weed*, *Button weed*, *Cáñamo de abutilón* (Spanish), *Canapa d'abutilon* (Italian), *Canapa d'abutilone* (Italian), *Cânhamo de abutilon* (Portuguese), *Chauvre d'abutilon* (French), *China jute* (English, German), *Chinese hemp*, *Chinesischer Hanf* (German), *Chinesische Jute* (German), *Ch'ing* (Chinese), *Chingma jute*, *Chingma lantern*, *Cotton weed*, *Duga konoplja* (Croatian), *Duga konopljika* (Croatian), *Fausse guimauve* (French), *Fausse guimauve jaune* (French), *Flower of an hour*, *Fluweelblad* (Dutch), *Guimauve jaune* (French), *Hinaha giri* (Japanese), *Hind keneviri* (Turkish), *Ichibi* (Japanese), *Indian hemp*, *Indian mallow*, *Jaya* (Sanskrit), *Juta da China* (Portuguese), *Juta de Tien-Tsin* (Portuguese), *Juta di Cina* (Italian), *Juta di Tien-Tsin* (Italian), *Jute de Chine* (French), *Jute de Manchourie* (French), *Jute de Tien-Tsin* (French), *Jût el manshûri* (Arabic), *Kanatnik teofrasta* (Russian), *Kelta-aulio* (Finnish), *Kinajute* (Danish), *Kingma jute*, *Kiri asa* (Japanese), *Kusa giri* (Japanese), *Lindenblättrige Schönmalve* (German), *Lindmalva* (Swedish), *Lipica* (Serbian), *Malva blanca* (Spanish), *Malva de terciopelo* (Spanish), *Malva gialla tessile* (Italian), *Malva grande* (Spanish), *Malvão* (Portuguese), *Manchurian jute*, *Mançurya keneviri* (Turkish), *Marsh mallow*, *Mormon weed*, *Mountain lily*, *Mračnjak* (Croatian), *Mračňák theophratův* (Czech), *Nahani khapat* (Hindi), *Njemačka loza* (Bosnian), *Old maid*, *Pie maker*, *Pie-marker*, *Pie print*, *Podslnečnik Theofrastov* (Slovenian), *Qing ma* (Chinese), *Rumeni slez* (Slovenian), *Santpappel* (German), *Schmuckmalve* (German), *Schönmalve* (German), *Shawk el ghanam* (Arabic), *Sheepweed*, *Sommer-Schönmalve* (German), *Stampweed*, *Swamp Chinese lantern*, *Talyun* (Turkish), *Tang ma* (Chinese), *Tientsin jute* (English, German), *Veliki sljez* (Croatian), *Velvet leaf Indian mallow*, *Velvet leaved jute*, *Velvet weed*, *Wild cotton*, *Wild okra*, *Yute de China* (Spanish), *Yute de Ching-Ma* (Spanish), *Yute de King-Ma* (Spanish), *Yute de la China* (Spanish), *Yute de Tien-Tsin* (Spanish), *Želudarka* (Serbian), *Žuti slez* (Serbian), *Žuti sljez* (Croatian), and *Žutošljez* (Croatian).

The plant is often pollinated by birds.

The inner bark of the stems yields a fine strong, greyish-white fibre which can be referred to as China jute, Chinese jute, Manchurian jute or Tientsin jute. The hairy seeds yield an oil.

Theophrasti commemorates a Greek philosopher and naturalist, Theophrastus (c.372-c.287) who is viewed widely as the founder of botany. He studied under Plato (c.428 BC-c.348 BC) then Aristotle (384-322 BC) and, eventually, succeeded the latter in 322 BC as head

of the Lyceum, the Peripatetic School in Athens. He also inherited Aristotle's library, manuscripts and garden (as well as guardianship of his children). His own works were numerous and broad-ranging (from philosophy and natural sciences to more literary subjects) and they included *Historia De Plantis* and another on vegetable growth *De Causis Plantarum*, as well as *Characters* (30 sketches of moral types).

The stem fibre has provided material for caulking boats and in North America it has also been used to make rope, twine and paper. Today the fibre is used commercially for rug-making.

Velvet leaf is believed to have been introduced to North America before 1750, apparently as a possible source of fibre for rope-making and for weaving bags. But it did not win friends upon its arrival there. Records show that in Virginia particularly it spread like wildfire and became invasive. Also it was unable to oust hemp's (*Cannabis sativa*) popularity – the traditional fibre-crop on the Atlantic Seaboard since Henry VIII's (1491-1547) demands made on English settlers back in the 16th Century and one which had been cultivated in Virginia since 1611. Despite this past experience efforts were made early in 20th Century North America to encourage farmers (again) to establish velvet leaf as a commercial fibre crop. This time, however, it seems the labour costs were found to be too high – and in the mid-1980s farmers were sorely reminded of the plant's disastrous invasive qualities as estimated harvest losses in the region of an annual \$343 million for adulterated soya bean (*Glycine max*) and maize (*Zea*) crops were being bandied about. However during the Second World War China had benefited from exporting velvet leaf's fibre (she had such a massive pool of available cheap labour to turn to) but her market began to disintegrate once peace was declared and competition from other fibres grew. Medicinally, the roots have been used to treat fever in local folk remedies.