

*Aechmea magdalenae*

[Synonyms : *Aechmea magdalenae* var. *quadricolor*, *Ananas magdalenae*, *Bromelia longissima*, *Bromelia magdalenae*, *Chevaliera magdalenae*, *Chevaliera magdalenae* var. *quadricolor*]

**PITA** is an evergreen perennial. Native to Central and South America (including Mexico) it has very long narrow green leaves with forward-curving spiked edges. It is also known as Aechmea, Arghan fibre, *Ixtle* (Spanish), Magdalene aechmea, Pita fibre and Silk grass.

The leaves yield a very long, tough strong and durable, hard waterproof fibre often known as Pinguin or Pita.

*Magdalenae* means ‘of or from the Rio Magdalena, Colombia’.

In the wild pita grows in the shade of a rain-forest’s canopy which enables it to develop its long tough fibres. These fibres have been appreciated locally for hundreds and hundreds of years and have been used to make rope, twine, fishing nets and hammocks – while in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century the fibre was imported by Europe for use in her ships’ rigging.

Pita is now a threatened species not only because of loss of habitat in which it thrives but also from over-harvesting in the wild. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century however pita has offered an example of how a concern for the environment and a need to provide a living for a local community can go hand in hand. In the face of local farmers’ inexorable encroachment on the Mexican Uxpanapa rain-forest this was dwindling rapidly. Not only is this particular rain-forest (or the then remains of it, approximately 198,000 acres) home to a wealth of invaluable flora and fauna but it also provides a famed resting stage for migrating hawks in Spring and Autumn. Pita grows in the wild there and farmers were encouraged by conservation groups to harvest the plant so that craftsmen could use the fibre to weave intricate patterns for decorating leather goods ranging from saddles to smaller items such as note-cases and belts. To this point conservationists managed to slow down the felling of the forest (the farmers realised that the plants need the forest’s shade to grow properly) and generated a minimal income for some of the poorest families. But the overall success of the ventures exceeded projections and it is reported that there is a seemingly ever-increasing demand for these goods (even though they are not generally traded outside Mexico). This itself was creating a threat to the very environment the conservation bodies were aiming to protect – as would commercial farming of the plant on a large-scale as this would not only undermine the price of the plant (which stabilised at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century) but deprive needy families of income. Thus some of the conservationists turned to fostering pita’s cultivation by local families under trees on their smallholdings and actively to discourage its harvesting in the wild – as well as encouraging local farmers to monitor plants growing in the wild not least because these would be essential as a ‘blood bank’ (similar to the genetic information relied upon in the wild plants husbanded in Ethiopia and South America respectively for coffee (*Coffea arabica*) or cocoa plantations (*Theobroma cacao*)) in the event of disease or other problem with the cultivated crops.