

Alstonia scholaris

[Synonyms : *Echites malabarica*, *Echites scholaris*, *Nerium tinctorium*, *Pala scholaris*]

DITA BARK is an evergreen tree. Native to tropical Asia (particularly India and the Philippine Islands) and Australia, it has tiny sweetly scented, greenish-white flowers.

It is also known as Alstonia, Alstonia bark, Australian fever bush, Bitter bark, Blackboardtree, *Chatian* (Assamese, Hindi), *Chatinan* (Oriya), *Chattim* (Bengali), Cheesewood, Devil's bit, Devil tree, Dita, *Ditabaum* (German), Djelutung, *Edakulapala* (Telugu), Jelutung, *Lamè* (Sundanese), *Maddale* (Kannada), Milkwood, Milkwood pine, Milky pine, *Pala* (Malayalam, Tamil), *Palaigh* (Tamil, Telugu), Pale mara, Pali-mara, Palmira alstonia, *Pulai* (Malay), *Pulé* (Javanese), *Ruk-attana* (Singhalese), *Sapta parna* (Sanskrit), *Saptparni* (Gujarati), *Satvin* (Marathi), Scholar tree, *Shaitan* (Marathi), Shaitan wood, *Sĩa* (Vietnamese), *Tin ped* (Thai), and White cheesewood.

Scholaris means 'relating to school' i.e. the wood of dita bark was used locally to make writing tablets for schoolchildren.

Hill tribes in western India have associated the tree with evil guardian spirits and, because of this, would not even walk through its shade – let alone fall asleep beneath it as this would have meant certain death.

For Malays the tree is sacred.

In the tropics not only has the tree provided bark for medicine for hundreds of years (today it is still available in most oriental drug shops) but it was also used as writing slates. These were cleaned i.e. the writing was rubbed out, using the rough leaves of one of the species of *Tetracera*.

Locally also the lightweight soft, whitish wood has long been used for making coffins (and still is today) especially in Sri Lanka. It has also been used to make furniture and matches. In Borneo (an island that now includes Brunei and parts of Malaysia and Indonesia) where the wood of this species is especially lightweight and white near the root, it has been used to make fishing net floats and household utensils.

Mention of the medicinal use of the bark has been found in the Sanskrit *Susruta Samhita* that was written around 600. While Malaysian medicinal use of dita bark is said to pre-date such records its use there today is no longer as great.

Medicinally, the bark has been used in the past to treat rheumatism, diarrhoea, bowel complaints and intestinal disorders, and in India and the Far East it was a remedy for malaria, fever generally, chronic diarrhoea, dysentery and snake bites (and the milky juice was used for treating ulcers). In Java (now an Indonesian island) it has also been used to treat worms in children. Today its use in fever generally has been shown to be beneficial but some doubts exist about its value for treating malaria – and the bark does provide a commercial ingredient for the pharmaceutical industry.