

Blighia sapida

[Synonyms : *Cupania edulis*, *Cupania sapida*]

AKEE (English, Spanish) is an evergreen tree. Native to West Africa, it has small fragrant, greenish-white flowers with conspicuous stamens.

It is also known as Ackee, Aka, Akee akee, Akee apple, Akee tree, *Akipflaume* (German), *Seso vegetal* (Spanish), and Vegetable brain.

There can be several crops of the dangling orange or bright red fruit in 1 year. The fruit, which have a nutty smell, split open at the bottom three ways when ripe, flaring to reveal the seeds – and become rancid rapidly. It is said to have a delicious, nutty, scrambled-egg taste when cooked.

Warning – all parts of the fruit are extremely poisonous to humans and some animals, except the naturally ripened, light whitish, firm fleshy substance. Unripe, unfertilized, over-ripe or otherwise abnormal light whitish flesh, as well as the seeds and fruit walls of the fruit (including those of the chambers) are all poisonous. They can cause irreversible liver damage, violent vomiting, followed by quiet periods, convulsions, then coma and death – an illness sometimes known as ‘Jamaica poisoning’.

Sapida is derived from Latin *sapio* (to taste, have a flavour) meaning ‘pleasant tasting’.

Some authorities ponder the likelihood of the derivation of the name Akee and suggest that it might come from the Mayan name for several plants with flowers that attract bees *achee*.

In its native habitat in west Africa the unripe green fruit have been rubbed in water to obtain a lather for washing clothes. It is hardly surprising to learn therefore that ashes of the burnt dried husks have also been used as an ingredient in making soap.

Also in West Africa the pounded fruit are used to stun fish.

Some authorities claim that the tree was introduced from West Africa to tropical America with the slave trade without specifically attributing any credit, and others say that the then, Captain, Bligh (1754-c.1817) of HMS *Bounty* fame introduced it to Jamaica in 1771 when he successfully landed the breadfruit (*Artocarpus altilis*) there.

Certainly at the beginning of the 21st Century the tree can be found growing as an ornamental plant in many tropical countries.

The wood has been used in some regions for carpentry, for making charcoal and for fuel.

The akee is the national fruit of Jamaica and has managed to carve a place in the Country’s tradition as nowhere else. It is a familiar design on many articles and signs and the tree (or parts of it) have featured on postage stamps and coins. It is even celebrated in Jamaican place and business names, is the subject of local folktales and proverbs, features positively in everyday expressions, and is referred to in Jamaican literature and songs. For Rastafarians the akee represents a ‘key’ to wisdom in their art. The fruit also feature in carvings made for the tourist industry.

It is grown in Jamaica particularly for its fruit, of which only the naturally ripened white fleshy substance inside is edible. Harvesting is overtly signalled when the fruit split open and ‘smile’ or ‘laugh’. In Jamaica particularly it is usually viewed as a staple food that as a delicacy or festive dish is often fried in butter and with salted fish – but it can also be enjoyed raw, roasted, or added to soup. Akee features in a traditional Jamaican dish known as ‘vegetable brain’. Canning and shipping of the perfectly ripe fruit is now

common in Jamaica. (Witness a reporter attending one of the West Country carnivals in England in 2003 made particular mention of a dish of akee and fish he had found there.) Until the poisonous nature of the fruit was understood 'vomiting sickness' was experienced in epidemic proportions in Jamaica in particular. The introduced fruit are still understood to be responsible for a large number of those deaths diagnosed as 'Jamaica poisoning' in the West Indies – so much so that the cultivation of akee has been banned in most areas in the southern United States where it would grow successfully. The United States has also banned the importation of canned akee (until the Jamaican Government can guarantee the edibility of the processed fruit) which has closed what was a valuable market for Jamaican farmers – although they still export it, to the Caribbean, Canada and Britain particularly.

The fruit, despite their poisonous nature, are eaten by some birds and animals – so much so that their competition with man adds an urgency to the precision of harvesting.