

Boehmeria nivea

[Synonyms : *Ramium niveum*, *Urtica nivea*]

RAMIE (Danish, Dutch, English, German, Norwegian) is a shrub. Native to tropical Asia, particularly China, it has tiny, greenish flowers.

It is also known as *Amirai* (Filipino/Tagalog), Cambric grass, Canton linen, China grass, China linen, Chinese grass, Chinese silk plant, *Chinesische Nessel* (German), *Chu-ma* (Chinese), Cotton nettle, Grass-cloth hemp, Grass-cloth plant, *Haramay* (Sundanese), *Kankhura* (Bengali, Hindi), *Kara mushi* (Japanese), *Kinagras* (Norwegian), *Nambankara mushi* (Japanese), *Ortiga blanca* (Spanish), *Pan* (Thai), *Rami* (Malay, Portuguese, Russian), *Ramie de Chine* (French), Ramie grass, *Ramio* (Spanish), *Rhea* (Assamese), Rhea fibre, Rhea grass, *Szczmiel biały* (Polish), White ramie, and *Zhu-ma* (Chinese).

A very fine fibre can be extracted from the inner bark on the stems.

Nivea is Latin (snowy, of snow) meaning 'snow-white or growing near snow' (in this case the former).

Ramie has been cultivated in Asia for at least 7,000 years, particularly China, and is mentioned in Chinese records of about 2200 BC. It was also familiar to the ancient Egyptians who employed it for wrapping mummies.

It is understood that ramie came under the close scrutiny of the Europeans only in the 18th Century when its amazing strength was first appreciated. Authorities explain that this nettle-like plant (*Urtica*) yields from its stems the only known vegetable fibre at the turn of the 20th/21st Centuries of such length, strength, silkiness and toughness. The fibre is said to be three times stronger than hemp (*Cannabis sativa*), seven times stronger than silk, and eight times stronger than cotton (*Gossypium*). (But it displays neither the flexibility of cotton nor the elasticity of wool or silk and this contributes to the comparative harshness of the ultimate material.) In 1808 the Dutch waxed enthusiastically about fibre received from Sumatra (now part of Indonesia), and in 1809 the Italians experimented in Italy with its cultivation. Records of 1811 mention that the East India Company had established a substantial nursery of plants in the Botanic Gardens in Calcutta, no doubt in anticipation of much interest in the plant. Up to the present time further enthusiasm for any commercial exploitation of the plant has burgeoned periodically and foundered. There seems to be a major drawback in its processing – to this day no practicable, economic way, in this ever-increasingly, cost-conscious world, has been found to release the fibres from the gum clinging to them which would enable wider use of ramie than has been possible so far.

Even with labour-intensive preparation however the fibre is still woven in Asia today on a small scale for commercial use to produce a very fine material, variously called Canton, Chinese or Grass linen, or Swatow grass. Heavier qualities are also made for use in gas mantles, cordage, fishing nets, sailcloth, sacking and carpet-backing, as well as such disparate items as parachute harnesses and shoe-laces.. The finer materials are made into table linen, sheeting, upholstery materials, curtains and clothing – and mixed with cotton (*Gossypium*) or wool it can also find a role in Winter knitwear. The fibre has also been used for making paper (bank note quality).

Medicinally, Malaysians have used a leaf poultice on boils, and in some parts of Asia the roots

and leaves are used in the treatment of dysentery.