

Bombax ceiba

[Synonyms : *Bombax heptaphyllum*, *Bombax malabaricum*, *Gossampinus heptaphylla*, *Gossampinus malabarica*, *Gossampinus rubra*, *Salmalia malabarica*]

RED COTTON-TREE is a deciduous tree. Native to tropical Asia (especially India and Burma – the latter referred to today as Myanmar) and northern Australia, it has large, bright crimson-red (occasionally yellow or white) flowers each with scarlet-tipped stamens.

It is also known as *Arbol capoc* (Spanish), *Arbol kapok* (Spanish), *Arbre bombax* (French), *Algodoeiro do mato* (Portuguese), *Arvore de panha* (Portuguese), *Bómbax* (Portuguese), *Bonga* (Portuguese), *Borracha* (Portuguese), *Borracho* (Portuguese), *Buboygubat* (Filipino/Tagalog), *Cartageno* (Portuguese), *Ceiba* (Portuguese), *Cotonnier mapou* (French), Cotton tree, *Didu* (Burmese), Flame of the forest, *Fromager* (French), *Himila* (Assamese), *Himolu* (Assamese), *Ilava* (Tamil), *Ilavu* (Tamil), *Imbiruçu* (Portuguese), Indian cottonwood, Indian kapok, Indian silk cotton tree, *Indischer Seidenwollbaum* (German), *Kaantisenbal* (Hindi), *Kantisembal* (Hindi), *Kapok* (Portuguese), *Kapokbombako* (Esperanto), Kapok tree, *Katseori* (Bengali), *Katu-imbul* (Sinhalese), *Lat pan* (Burmese), *Lepanbin* (Burmese), *Letpan* (Burmese), Malabar simal-tree, *Malabulak* (Filipino/Tagalog), *Mocha* (Malayalam), *Mullilavu* (Tamil), *Mu mien* (Chinese), *Ngio* (Thai), *Ngio ban* (Thai), *Ngio daeng* (Thai), *Ngio pong* (Thai), *Ngio pong daeng* (Thai), *Ngui* (Thai), *Ouatier rouge* (Seychellois), *Paineira da India* (Portuguese), *Panha* (Portuguese), *Panheira* (Portuguese), *Parutti* (Tamil), *Purani* (German), *Puulaa* (Tamil), *Rakat senbal* (Hindi), Red flowered silk-cotton tree, Red silk cotton, Red silk cotton tree, *Roka* (Cambodian, Khmer), *Roktosimul* (Bengali), *Roter Seidenwollbaum* (German), *Salay* (Visayan), *Salmali* (Telugu), *Salmili* (Sanskrit), *Sayar* (Marathi), *Semal* (Hindi), *Semar kanda* (Hindi), *Semul* (German, Hindi), *Semur* (Hindi), *Shaalmali* (Sanskrit), *Shalmali* (Sanskrit), Shaving brush, *Shembal* (Hindi), *Shimbal* (Hindi), *Shimlo* (Gujarati), *Shimul* (Gujarati), Silk-cotton tree, *Simalboom* (Dutch), *Simal* (Hindi, Nepalese), Simal tree, *Simbal* (German), *Simul* (Hindi), *Sombal* (Persian), *Sum* (Punjabi), *Sumaúma* (Portuguese), *Taglinau* (Filipino/Tagalog), *Talutu* (Visayan), *Vomvax malavarikos* (Greek), and *Zijdekapokboom* (Dutch).

Many birds and insects are attracted by the tree's nectar and pollen. Gum oozes from the bark and turns red on the tree trunk as it hardens in contact with the air. The fruit burst when mature and scatter the cotton. The hair-laden seeds are dispersed by the wind.

Ceiba is a corruption of a South American name for the kapok tree (*Ceiba pentandra*) once included in the *Bombax* genus.

Among red cotton-tree's botanical synonyms are the names *malabaricum* or *malabarica* which mean 'of or from the Malabar coast (south-western India)'.

Red cotton-tree is often grown in tropical areas as an ornamental and shade tree.

For some when the tree bears yellow flowers it is held to have magical powers.

Hindu legend tells how Brahma rested under the red cotton-tree after creating the world.

The soft whitish wood is attractive to white ants and this limits its uses. However local fishermen have not only made it into floats for their nets but have also used it to make dugout canoes with outriggers. Apart from packaging, the lightweight wood has also been

used locally to make a wide range of items from bridges, water troughs and house doors to coffins and weapon scabbards. In India especially the wood is used on a commercial scale for the manufacture of matches, while Sri Lanka chooses it for making packing cases.. The wood yields a paper pulp and is also a possible source of cellulose. Charcoal from red cotton tree wood is of a suitable grade for making fireworks.

In Burma (correctly now Myanmar) particularly, the freshly opened young flowers have been cooked and eaten as a vegetable, usually as a side dish with curry. While in northern India the young flower buds have been eaten as a vegetable when there has been a food shortage. The young bark (mature bark contains too much tannin) has also provided emergency rations.

Locally the sticky gum oozing out of the bark has been used by boatmen to fill holes in their vessels, and fibre from the inner bark has been made into cordage.

As the fruit swell the flowers begin to drop and are then enjoyed by deer. Earlier the squirrels have feasted on the flower buds.

Similar oil to that from kapok seeds (*Ceiba pentandra*) can be extracted from the seeds of the red cotton-tree. This too can be used for making soap or as a lighting fuel.

The residual cake after the seed oil has been extracted has been used as animal feed. The leaves and twigs are also cut for fodder.

The 'cotton' is not suitable for spinning but like kapok (*Ceiba pentandra*), although of much poorer quality, it has long been used commercially as stuffing in anything from saddles and mattresses to pillows and cushions.

Medicinally, the root and bark have been employed to cause vomiting ie. as an emetic. It (and the gum) has also been used in India as an aphrodisiac (of doubtful qualities, authorities say) to remedy impotence. And the gum, in India and other parts of Asia, has been used in some areas for treating diarrhoea, dysentery, period problems and other ailments. Flowers and fruit have provided a cure for snake bites. Dried flowers have been an ingredient in medicines taken to treat internal inflammation, and in Chinese medicine have been applied to boils and sores. The root has also provided a tonic.