

Borassus flabellifer

[Synonyms : *Borassus aethiopum*, *Borassus flabelliformis*]

PALMYRA is a palm. Native from India to Burma (known today as Myanmar), it has flowers protected by leaf-like boat-shaped sheaths.

It is also known as African fan palm, *Boraso* (Spanish), *Borasse* (French), *Borassus* (English, French), *Borassuspalme* (German), *Boras vejárovitý* (Slovak), *Broção* (Portuguese), *Lontaropalme* (German), Deleb palm, *Doleib* (Arabic), *Dôm* (Arabic), *Dom thuot* (Khmer), Doub palm, Great fan palm, *Karatalamu* (Telugu), *Karimabana* (Tamil), *Lontar* (Dutch, Javanese, Malay), *Lontaropalme* (German), *Lontarovaia pal'ma* (Russian), Lontar palm, *Ougi yashi* (Japanese), *Palma del ferro* (Italian), *Palma del Sagù* (Italian), *Palma di Palmira* (Italian), *Palma palmira* (Spanish), *Palmeira de leque* (Portuguese), *Palmeira de palmira* (Portuguese), *Palmier de Palmyre* (French), *Palmira* (Portuguese), *Pal'mira* (Russian), *Pal'mirova pal'ma* (Russian), Palmyra palm, *Palmyrapalm* (Dutch, Swedish), *Palmyrapalme* (Danish, German), *Palmyrapalmu* (Finnish), *Pana* (Malayalam), *Panai* (Tamil), *Panna-maram* (Tamil), *Pannei* (Tamil), *Parumira yashi* (Japanese), *Rondier* (French), *Rônier* (French), Sea apple, Seed palm, *Shag el mûql* (Arabic), *Shan ye shu tou zong* (Chinese), *Shan ye tang zong* (Chinese), *Taad* (Hindi, Marathi, Urdu), *Taada* (Gujarati), *Taadii* (Nepalese), *Taal* (Nepalese), *Taala* (Bengali), *Tad* (Gujarati, Marathi), *Tadh* (Marathi), *Tadi-chettu* (Telugu), *Tad mar* (Hindi), *Tal* (Bengali, Hindi, Sanskrit, Singhalese, Turkish), *Tâl* (Arabic), *Tala* (Hindi), Tala palm, *Tal-gas* (Singhalese), *Taan tanot* (Thai), *Taan yai* (Thai), *Tan* (Thai), *Tanta note* (Thai), *Tatichettu* (Telugu), Toddy palm, *Weinpalme* (German), and Wine palm; and in flower language (as for all palms), is said to be a symbol of victory.

The seed pulp is ground into a type of flour and the sap is boiled to obtain sugar. The trees can be tapped for their sap (50-80 gallons per tree) for 4-5 months annually for 30-40 years once they are 15 years old. Sago can be made from the palm's starchy trunk pith.

Flabellifer is derived from Latin *flabellum* (small fan) and *-fer* (bearing, carrying) components meaning 'fan-bearing'.

The sap in the fruit spike provides a refreshing drink and when fermented, toddy, and both the young fruit and the mature grapefruit-sized dark purple nuts provide food, the latter often found in the local bazaars in the East as a vegetable. When the sap is boiled within 4-5 hours of collection sugar, known locally as 'jaggery', can be produced and after fermentation for 4-5 days it yields arrack. The sap is also used to make vinegar.

Both Buddhists and Hindus have revered palmyra as a sacred plant. Some authorities suggest this may have arisen because the leaves were once used in India for sacred writings before paper supplanted them. Their use as writing material seems to have spread beyond Indian shores and often competed with other uses made of palmyra leaves.

In the same way that it is said that the Arabs have listed 365 uses for the date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*), so a Tamil poem is understood to offer 801 ways in which palmyra can be used.

For Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles (1781-1826) the celebrated English colonial administrator, palmyra was particularly associated with a tradition practised by past rulers of the Indonesian island of Sulawesi (once known as Celebes). Apparently he would request the

presence of one of his courtiers by sending him a palmyra leaf with as many of its points knotted as the number of days' notice of the command.

Locally young leaves are used to make fans, buckets, hats and mats, and fibre from parts of the stalks provide broom and brush bristles for export. They have also been used for thatching and making paper. In India the leaves, pushed into rice fields (*Oryza*) to rot, have provided green manure. Pieces of dried leaf have been used as a reed in musical pipes.

Palms over 60 years old provide very hard, durable building timber that is used locally.

Apparently the hardest part of the wood is only a few inches thick and that from female trees is considered to be superior to any from male ones. In Europe the wood has been used to make walking sticks, umbrella handles and rulers.

Medicinally, the plant's juice has been used locally to treat fluid retention and inflammation.