

### *Calotropis procera*

[Synonyms : *Asclepias gigantea*, *Asclepias procera*, *Calotropis busseana*, *Calotropis hamiltoni*, *Calotropis heterophylla*, *Calotropis inflexa*, *Calotropis persica*, *Calotropis persica* subsp. *hamiltonii*, *Calotropis syriaca*, *Calotropis wallichii*]

**CALOTROPIS** is a shrub or tree. Native to India (particularly Hindustan) it has small, purple tipped and centrally purple spotted, whitish flowers which have a slight fragrance.

It is also known as *Ak* (Punjabi), *Akarda* (Hindi), *Alarka* (Sanskrit), Apple of Sodom, Auricula tree, *Bois-la-soie* (French), *Coton-France* (French), Crown flower, Dead Sea apple, Felt plant, French cotton, French jasmine, Giant milkweed, *Mandara* (Malayalam), Mudar bark, Mudar fibre, Mudar yercum, Roostertree, Small crownflower, Sodom apple, Swallow wort, *Tobbiya* (Ethiopian), *Ushar* (Arabic), *Vellerukku* (Tamil), Wild cotton, and Wild down.

The flowers are usually pollinated by flies, and the seeds are dispersed by the wind.

Warning – the milky sap is poisonous in large doses, and excessive doses of the bark can cause vomiting, diarrhoea, altered heartbeat, increased blood pressure, laboured breathing, convulsions and death.

*Procera* is Latin (tall, long) meaning ‘tall’.

In Africa the roots are chewed, and in West Africa the leaves are used to make a local beer known as Merissa.

The stems yield a fine, hemp-like (*Cannabis sativa*) fibre, known as ‘akund fibre’ or ‘French cotton’ and this is used amongst other things for fishing lines. (The silky white hairs on the seeds have provided a cushion filling, and in the past they were also used to make handkerchiefs, shawls and paper.)

Latex-like juice from the stems is mixed with salt to provide a mixture harsh enough to remove hair from hides in preparation for tanning. In India and Sudan, more grimly, this concoction has been used for abortion, to kill newborn children and for suicide.

Despite its poisonous qualities in many countries such as Saudi Arabia *calotropis* is grazed in times of drought.

The wood yields a charcoal used in gunpowder and fireworks.

Today the strong stem fibre is used commercially for making fishing nets, ropes and halters.

The seed floss provides stuffing for mattresses. The wood is still processed to produce gunpowder quality charcoal and the bark is used medicinally.

Medicinally, the bark has been recommended, particularly in India, for the treatment of leprosy, elephantiasis, eczema, dysentery, vomiting and diarrhoea, the root is used to treat fever, and the stem latex is employed in remedies for scorpion bites. In the Philippines the stem latex has also been used externally to treat ulcers. Dried root bark has been used in western Africa to treat some stomach disorders and wind, leaves have provided remedies for catarrh, headaches and swollen legs, the sap (or latex), leaves and fruit have been prescribed as a treatment for worms, especially guinea worms, and the plant has also been applied in the treatment of some eye ailments.