

Carica papaya

[Synonyms : *Carica hermaphrodita*, *Carica jimenezii*, *Carica mamaja*, *Carica mamaya*, *Carica papaya* var. *mamaya*, *Carica papaya* var. *jimenezii*, *Carica pinnatifida*, *Carica sativa*, *Carica vulgaris*, *Papaia vulgaris*, *Papaya carica*, *Papaya communis*, *Papaya cucumerina*, *Papaya edulis*, *Papaya edulis* var. *macrocarpa*, *Papaya edulis* var. *pyriformis*, *Papaya papaya*, *Papaya sativa*, *Papaya vulgaris*]

PAPAYA (Dutch, English, German, Gujarati, Hindi, Spanish, Swedish) is an evergreen tree-like plant. Native to tropical America it has small waxy, twisted-petalled, fragrant white to yellow flowers.

It is also known as *Anabahe-hindi* (Arabic), *Anobahe-hindi* (Persian), *Arand-Kharbuza* (Indian), *Arbre à melons* (French), *Bate* (Malay), *Betek* (Malay), *Betik* (Malay), *Boppayi* (Telugu), Common papaw, Custard apple, *Du đù* (Vietnamese), *Fan mo kwa* (Chinese), *Fan mu gua* (Chinese), *Fico del Isole* (Italian), *Fruta bomba* (Cuban), *Gandul* (Javanese), *Gedang* (Indonesian, Malay, Sundanese), *Kapaya* (Filipino/Tagalog), *Kates* (Indonesian, Malay), *Kavun ag* (Turkish), *Ketalah* (Malay), *Ketela* (Malay), *Lapaya* (Filipino/Tagalog), *Lechosa* (Puerto Rican), *Loko* (Thai), *Ma-la-ke* (Thai), *Malako* (Thai), *Malakor* (Thai), *Ma kuai thet* (Thai), *Mamão* (Brazilian, Portuguese), *Mamón* (Spanish), *Mando* (Brazilian), Medicine tree, *Meloenboom* (Dutch), *Melonenbaum* (German), *Melonowisec wlasciwy* (Polish), *Melonträäd* (Swedish), *Melontræ* (Danish), Melon tree, *Melón zapote* (Spanish), *Mubabai* (Kikuyu), *Mu-kua-wan-shou-kuo* (Chinese), *Papa*, *Papago* (Italian), *Papaia* (Italian, Portuguese, Russian), *Papaieiro* (Portuguese), *Papaija* (Finnish), *Papaiya* (Japanese), *Papája melónová* (Slovak), *Papája melounová* (Czech), *Papajo* (Esperanto), Papaw, *Papay* (Creole), *Papayabaum* (German), *Papâya-papa* (Malay), *Papaye* (French), *Papayer* (French), *Papayero* (Spanish), *Papayo* (Canary Islands, Spanish), *Papeeta* (Hindi), Papeta, *Papiitaa* (Hindi, Urdu), *Pappali* (Tamil), *Pappayam* (Malayalam), *Pappayi* (Tamil), Pawpaw, *Papeya* (Bengali), *Pepol* (Sinhalese), *Popoo* (Japanese), *Popoyiah* (Indian), *Thimbaw* (Burmese), and Tree melon.

The bark is cut, and the unripe fruit are lightly scored (while still on the plant) to release the thin, white latex (a source of the enzyme called ‘papain’).

Warning – root, sap and seeds can cause abortion. Internal use is best supervised by a qualified practitioner. The sap can cause skin irritation and blistering.

Papaya is derived from names local in tropical America.

It might be wise to think twice about using the name Papaya in Cuba as apparently it is slang for the female sex organ.

Records note that papaya has provided local food for Hawaiians and North American Seminole Indians. Today as well as furnishing a thirst quenching drink (from the juice) the melon-like (*Cucumis*), ripe, yellow or orange-red fruit are eaten fresh (often with sugar and fresh lemon or lime juice), and can be used to make sauces as well as, when unripe, jams. The pickled or boiled, unripe green fruit can also be served as a vegetable, and the young leaves have been prepared as a spinach-like (*Spinacia oleracea*) vegetable. The flowers are eaten on the now Indonesian island of Java, and they are prepared as a sweetmeat in Malaysia.

Tough meat can be made tender by wrapping it in papaya leaves for several hours, or by putting the leaves in the water with boiling meat – or dried juice from a grazed fruit can be used for the same purpose. It is also said that chickens and pigs fed on the leaves (a long practised custom in China) will have tender flesh. (In fact it is recorded that many, many centuries ago the Chinese found that the suspension of freshly killed poultry among the leaves of a papaya ‘tree’ provided sufficient contact with the foliage to tenderise the toughest bird.)

On the one hand the fruit juice has been used to remove freckles and skin blemishes. On the other hand the leaves have been used as a substitute for soap (their addition to the washing water has been claimed to remove troublesome stains, especially on delicate fabrics).

Pacific islanders of New Caledonia are said to have smoked the leaves as a tobacco substitute. While in Mauritius smoking the leaves was alleged to be a treatment for asthma.

Papaya has attracted its own catalogue of legends from various countries. In Barbados for instance pigs living under a papaya would be long and thin, and humans living with a papaya growing to windward would be anaemic.

The papaya’s medicinal qualities seem to have left a strong impression on some early European explorers. The Genoese discoverer of the New World, Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) is said to have encouraged his crew to eat the fruit or powdered leaves as a digestive aid after meals, and the Portuguese world navigator, Vasco da Gama (c.1469-1525) is understood to have christened it the ‘golden tree of life’. In Hawaii nursing mothers took a fruit infusion to encourage milk flow, and the latex was an ingredient in a mixture applied to deep cuts.

Today the commercial world depends upon the enzyme, papain, for making a wide and striking range of products. For example it is not only used on the one hand in tanning and in manufacturing shrink-resistant woollen fabrics, but on the other it is also used in making beer (to reduce cloudiness), and in tenderising meat, as well as in producing invalid foods and digestive medicines. The fruit pulp is employed by the cosmetics industry in face creams, and the toiletry industry uses this in hair shampoos too.

Medicinally, locally, juice from fruit and root is used to treat boils and warts, and ease painful burns. Leaves are applied in a poultice to ulcers, and have been taken as a decoction for intestinal worms. Unripe green fruit are not only used as remedies for colds and indigestion, but their flesh has also been placed on wounds to aid healing and ease pain. The seeds and latex have also been used for treating intestinal worms. The roots have provided a remedy for piles (and have also been used for abortion), and the yellowish-red liquor obtained by soaking dried leaves in water has been taken as a treatment for some stomach upsets.