

*Cassia fistula*

[Synonyms : *Bactrylobium fistula*, *Cassia bonplandiana*, *Cassia excelsa*, *Cassia fistuloides*, *Cassia fistulosa*, *Cassia rhombifolia*, *Cathartocarpus excelsa*, *Cathartocarpus fistula*, *Cathartocarpus fistuloides*, *Cathartocarpus rhombifolius*]

**PURGING CASSIA** is a deciduous or semi-evergreen tree. Native to tropical Asia (particularly China, Sri Lanka and India), it has pea-like, fragrant, canary-yellow flowers with prominent stamens.

It is also known as *Alash* (Punjabi), Alexandrian purging cassia, *Amaltas* (Hindi, Urdu), Amaltas tree, *Amultas* (Bengali), *Ancherhan* (Filipino/Tagalog), *Appai* (Tamil), *Aragvadamu* (Telugu), *Bahava* (Malayalam), *Bandarlati* (Bengali), *Bereksa* (Malay), *Bhava* (Malayalam, Marathi), *Bobondelan* (Sundanese), *Cañafistola* (Spanish), *Canéfice* (French), *Canna fistula* (Portuguese), Cassia (English, Italian), Cassia pods, Cassia stick, *Chaiya-phruk* (Thai), *Chiar schambar* (Egyptian), Drumstick, *Ehela* (Singhalese), *Fistelkassie* (German), *Garmalo* (Gujarati), Golden rain, Golden shower, Golden-shower senna, Golden shower tree, Indian laburnum, *Indischer Goldregen* (German), *Kakke* (Kannada), *Kañá-pístola* (Filipino/Tagalog), *Kas dous* (Creole), *Kassia melaina* (Greek), *Khiyarchanbar* (Persian), *Khiyar shambur* (Arabic), *Konnai* (Tamil), *Kontai* (Tamil), Midas tree, *Ngu* (Burmese), Pudding-pipe tree, Pudding stick, *Purgierkassie* (German), Purging fistula, *Rajbirij* (Nepalese), *Reach chhpus* (Cambodian), *Relu* (Telugu), *Röhrenkassie* (German), *Sandari* (Oriya), Senna, Shower of gold, *Sonaru* (Assamese), *Sonawir* (Malay), *Sondal* (Bengali), *Suvarnaka* (Sanskrit), Sweet bark, *Tanggoeli* (Javanese), *Tch'ang ko chou* (Chinese), *Tiru* (Tamil), and *Tiruk-kontai* (Tamil).

In its native habitat the tree flowers as leaflets fall until the new growth appears, but elsewhere leaves and flowers can emerge together.

Warning – the fruit (and possibly other parts) are poisonous if overdoses are ingested, causing nausea, dizziness, abdominal pain, vomiting, bloody diarrhoea and kidney damage.

*Fistula* means ‘a hollow, pipe-like or a narrow duct or passage’ with reference to the shape of the fruit.

The plant was introduced to China over 1000 years ago and was familiar in Egypt by the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century.

Purging cassia can be a common sight in city streets and in gardens. In Mumbai (familiar to many in the West as Bombay), India, one such road has acquired the name ‘Laburnum Road’ because of the many purging cassia trees gracing its length.

In some parts of India stakes are made from the tree, secured in the ground and worshipped.

The yellow flowers are also gathered as temple offerings.

The young flower buds are eaten cooked as a vegetable in India, especially in the southern tip.

In Bengal (now divided into Indian West Bengal and Bangladesh) the pulp from the fruit pods flavours tobacco, and the pods have also been used in Europe in tobacco preparation.

In most areas the bark has been used locally for tanning, and in Java (now an Indonesian island) it has also been used for dyeing. The wood ash has provided a mordant in dyeing processes.

The greenish tinged, reddish heartwood is still used for inlay work and cabinet making, and the very heavy timber has also been made into fence posts, carts and agricultural implements.

Its hardness and strength have recommended it for paving, and at the other end of the scale its durability has also been valued for making bows and tom-toms. Authorities have noted that it has been used to make charcoal too. The heartwood has also been used for chewing in Thailand.

The fruit pods are a commercial ingredient used today by the pharmaceutical industry.

Medicinally, both the root bark and the pulp from the fruit pods (as well as the leaves and the flowers, candied) are used as a purgative, and the bark is also employed in the treatment of rheumatism. {The comment 'helps Mad People to sleep' made by the British physician and naturalist, Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753) is perhaps indicative of the treatment thought appropriate for inmates in British asylums of that period. Apparently the comment was a reference to the prescription of purging cassia as a treatment for patients diagnosed as insane.) In India the root has been used as a laxative and to treat fever, heart disease and snake bites, the leaf juice has also been applied for ringworm and various skin diseases, and it has been applied externally for easing gout and rheumatism.