

Cecropia peltata

[Synonyms : *Ambaiba peltata*, *Cecropia arachnoidea*, *Cecropia asperrima*, *Cecropia dielsiana*, *Cecropia peltata* var. *candida*, *Cecropia surinamensis*]

TRUMPET WOOD is a short-lived tree. Native to the West Indies, Mexico and Brazil it has dense spikes (spadices) of tiny flowers.

It is also known as *Ambahu* (Argentine), *Boessi papaja* (Surinamese), *Bois canon* (Dominican, French West Indian, St. Lucian), *Cecropia*, *Cetico* (Peruvian), *Guarumo* (Colombian, and Mexican), *Imbauba* (Brazilian), Indian snakewood, Pop-a-gun, Snakewood, *Tacuna* (Peruvian), Trumpeter, Trumpet tree, West Indian snakewood, and *Yagrumo* (Cuban, and Venezuelan).

The whitish wood turns pale brown upon exposure to air.

This tree yields a rubber-type latex from its hollow trunk and branches.

The hollow parts of the stems (between the joints) are often alive with a particular kind of ant which is likely to attack anything which disturbs it (including its abode being shaken).

These ants live in a symbiotic relationship with the tree. While the tree produces a special food for them and hollow trunks which they can infest, their presence as they raise their families deters the encroachment of vegetation and the attentions of browsing wildlife – and unthinking human intrusion. [It is interesting to note that some authorities have found that most of these trees in Puerto Rico are free of the ants whereas the majority of them in Trinidad and on the tropical American mainland are infested with the insects.]

Peltata is derived from Greek *pelto-* (small round shield, target) component meaning ‘shield-shaped’ with reference to the stalk’s position (towards the centre of the leaf not at the leaf edge).

Indian tribes in trumpet wood’s native region seem to have valued the trees most particularly for their medicinal properties. Even today locally a leaf decoction has been taken to ease fluid retention and some liver problems.

Locally the edible young buds have long been cooked as a vegetable. (Negro slaves added the flowers and leaves to broth.)

The hollow stems of this forest tree have been used locally on the one hand to make water pipes and on the other musical instruments.

In past centuries in Brazil bark fibre has provided material for making sails – and the large leaves have been used as sand paper.

The spongy wood has been made into rafts, as well as being used as tinder and burnt as fuel. It has provided material for manufacturing plywood and various boards, and has also been used for making matches, boxes and crates. In Brazil the pulped wood has been turned into paper.

Trumpet wood trees have been cultivated for their ornamental qualities.

The trees were introduced to Singapore in 1902 and are now found in other parts of south-eastern Asia where, according to some records, they are valued primarily for their medicinal properties – and then for the edible greyish-brown fruit and their usefulness as a source of fuel.

Medicinally, in Guyana and Barbados a leaf tea has offered a local remedy for some kidney disorders (the latter have also prescribed this for handling diabetes and high blood

pressure), while local Paraguayans have turned to the latex for stemming internal bleeding and some forms of venereal disease. Mexicans have applied stem juice to warts – and in the West Indies and South America apparently this has also been used in remedies for dysentery. It has been used too in treatments for asthma, snake bites, St. Vitus's Dance, fluid retention, diarrhoea, liver problems, fevers, flu, skin disorders, scorpion stings, warts and obesity.