

*Clusia rosea*

[Synonyms : *Clusia major*, *Clusia retusa*, *Clusia rosea* var. *colombiana*, *Elwertia retusa*, *Firkea rosea*]

**AUTOGRAPH TREE** is an evergreen tree. Native to the Caribbean (including the Virgin Islands), it has creamy pinkish-white flowers with many stamens on some flowers. It is also known as *Balsamapfel* (German), Balsam apple, Balsam fig, Clusia, Copey, *Cupey* (Italian), *Dam machu* (Dutch), Fat pork tree, *Figuier maudit* (French), *Klusia* (Finnish, German), Monkey apple, Pitch apple, Pitch apple tree, Scotch attorney, Star of the night, Strangler fig, *Varkensboom* (Dutch), and Wild mammy apple.

This tree has an unusual beginning – as an air plant. The seeds are dropped haphazardly, by birds for instance and land on the leaves of a tree. If one of them germinates there it will throw out roots that eventually reach the ground and strangle the host plant, the place of which it then supersedes. Autograph tree's wood is susceptible to attack from some insects. The leaves are particularly thick and tough.

Warning – the apple-like (*Malus*) sticky, brown fruit and the golden-yellow viscous sap are reputed to be poisonous (and the latter can cause violent diarrhoea).

*Rosea* means 'rose-like, rosy or rose-coloured'.

Although one of its common names is Strangler fig the autograph tree is not related to the fig (*Ficus*) genus which is in a completely different family.

The resin from the bark and fruit was once used locally for caulking boats.

Wood has not only provided local fuel or material for building construction, but it has also been used for making agricultural implements, cheap furniture, tool handles and fence posts.

Probably since the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century in Cuba, Florida and Hawaii (and places further afield such as parts of south-eastern Asia) autograph tree has been cultivated as an ornamental plant. (At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century it is considered to be invasive in some parts of Hawaii.)

Reference has already been made to its tough, thick leaves. This quality is well illustrated in the belief held by many authorities that early Spanish conquistadores used them as playing cards (symbols for the king, or the queen etc. were appropriately scratched on a leaf's surface) and as writing paper. No doubt they copied such use from the local population as today apparently one can still see evidence of lovers' vows or children's names scrawled on fresh green leaves.

Recent research has revealed that the tree displays a special mechanism associated with photosynthesis that enables it to conserve moisture. Until this was discovered it had only been seen in cacti and other succulent plants – and it explains why a seedling that begins life in the tree canopy has a chance of surviving and developing before its aerial roots reach the ground and a more secure source of nutrition and moisture in the soil below ground level.

Medicinally, local herbalists have applied the sap to sores (and Negro slaves used it to heal wounds) – and the bark, fruit and flowers have been added to bath water to ease rheumatism. The tree is said also to have been used in local treatments for leprosy.