

Hippomane mancinella

[Synonyms : *Hippomane dioica*, *Mancinella venenata*]

MANCHINEEL is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to Mexico and the West Indies it has tiny, yellowish-green flowers.

It is also known as Beach apple, *Madjini* (West Indian), *Mancenillier* (West Indian), Manchineel tree, *Manchinellbaum* (German), *Mancinelo* (Esperanto), *Manzanillbaum* (German), Manzanillo (English, German), Poison apple, Poison guava, and Shore apple; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of falsehood (tree).

Warning – the milky sap (latex) and the fruit are poisonous. The sap (and smoke from burning wood, or raindrops or heavy dew dripping from foliage) is a severe eye and skin irritant. Bruised leaves and bark should be handled carefully to avoid them touching bare skin. It can cause temporary blindness (often over some days), as well as reddened skin followed within hours by blistering. The fruit, after swallowing, can cause vomiting, abdominal pain, bleeding of the digestive tract and death. It is poisonous for animals.

Mancinella is a corruption of Spanish *manzanilla*, itself a diminutive of *manzana* (apple).

In the Caribbean and Middle America the sap was used for poisoned arrows, and for stunning fish. Some of the early Spanish explorers mistook the fruit for crab apples (*Malus*) and ate them to no good end.

The manchineel attracted many local legends most of which depended upon the virulent qualities of the sap eg. that men die by sitting in its shade. In actual fact there is some truth in this as it could be quite dangerous to be under the tree during or after rainfall as the poisonous milky latex in the bark could easily be washed onto anyone below by the raindrops – and, as already mentioned, the latex can cause temporary blindness in addition to severe blistering. Apparently a gentleman by the name of J. Jacquin, unstated when or where, is said to have stood naked under a manchineel tree for several hours to dispel its harsh reputation. It is held that he came through this self-imposed ‘ordeal’ with no ill effects and one can only assume that he performed this experiment during a dry spell.

Although today the tree is generally cultivated as a windbreak, in the past it has also been used medicinally. The latex was applied to skin ulcers to burn them out and in Cuba it has been used to treat tetanus.

The strong, dark brown wood is used in the West Indies for cabinetwork, and gunstocks.