

Hyphaene thebaica

DOUM PALM is a palm. Native to eastern Africa (particularly Upper Egypt and the Sudan), it has date-like glossy yellowish-brown fruit.

It is also known as *Dom* (Arabic), Dom palm, Dum palm, *Dumpalme* (German), Egyptian doum palm, Ginger bread palm, Ginger bread tree, and Vegetable ivory substitute.

Thebaica means ‘of or from Thebes (the capital of ancient Egypt from about 1660 -1500 BC, the ruins of which can be found in central Egypt on the banks of the Nile)’.

Doum palm was actively cultivated during the period of the ancient Egyptian civilization (for whom it was sacred), and archaeologists who have examined the tomb of Tut’ankhamun (the 18th Dynasty boy-king who died in c.1340 BC) found several baskets of the well-preserved fruit there. Most of today’s uses have been familiar in the region for thousands of years. With halfa grass and cotton grass (*Desmostachya bipinata* and *Imperata cylindrica* respectively), doum palm leaves were used to weave coarse rope – rope sometimes as thick as a man’s arm and of considerable strength as it was used to move the stones for building the temples and pyramids. The leaf fibre was also used to make rigging for the ships that plied the Nile.

Locally the gingerbread-tasting fruit are eaten raw, and they are sometimes fermented for palm-wine. The kernel’s rind is used in cakes and sweetmeats and it is also made into molasses.

Camels eat the young leaves.

Leaves have been used for thatching, and for making baskets, mats, tents and huts, and even for an inferior quality paper. They have also been burnt as fuel. The kernels have provided a vegetable ‘ivory’, and have been made into needles, buttons and small perfume boxes, as well as being incorporated in small wooden carvings.

Elephants are especially partial to the thick-and-mealy-skinned fruit.

Medicinally, ground nuts have been used locally as wound dressing.