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*Jasminum sambac*

[Synonyms : *Nyctanthes sambac*]

**ARABIAN JASMINE** is an evergreen shrub. Native to tropical Asia (especially India) it has small, strongly scented, pure white flowers.

It is also known as *Arabischer Jasmin* (German), *Bela* (Hindi), *Bel-bela* (Indian), *Geta-pichcha* (Singhalese), *Mali* (Thai), *Malliapoo* (Tamil), *Melor* (Malay), *Moghra* (Hindi), *Mogro* (Gujarati), *Mohle flowers*, *Mo-li* (Chinese), *Motiya* (Indian), *Pichcha* (Singhalese), *Rāsqi* (Arabic), *Tuscan jasmine*, and *Zambak* (Persian); and in flower language it is said to be a symbol of attraction, and ‘I attach myself to you’.

The flowers (which can be single, semi-double or double) turn purple when they die.

Essence is extracted from the flowers.

Warning – this species, particularly its root, is viewed by some as potentially poisonous.

*Sambac* is an Arabic name for the species.

The double varieties of this species are sacred to Vishnu and are used as offerings at Hindu religious ceremonies. The Hindus string the flowers into neck garlands with which honoured guests are bedecked. The flowers are also worn in the hair.

Arabian jasmine is said to have reached Egypt by at least 350 BC. In China where it was introduced at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century the flowers (actually the buds of this variety and another) are used to scent tea.

The plant was introduced to Europe in the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century, although its existence had been known about for some time by then. (It was first described accurately by an Italian in 1415.) The Portuguese navigator, Vasco da Gama (c.1469-1525) returned to Europe with this species from one of his trips to India. It is said that the Florentine magnate, Cosimo de Medici (1519-1574) who became Duke of Florence and then Grand Duke of Tuscany, acquired one of the plants. He was an able but ruthless soldier and ruler, as well as an Etruscan antique collector and patron of the arts. The story goes that he decreed that even the smallest of leaves from his plant must not escape from the garden. After some time however, despite this order, a young gardener who was engaged to be married surreptitiously took a cutting and gave it to his fiancée. In due time propagation of the cutting enabled the couple to become wealthy from the prohibited sale of jasmine plants in the local market, and also led to an attractive Tuscan wedding tradition still followed today of adorning the bride in jasmine sprigs.

It is rumoured that arabian jasmine was growing in the royal gardens at Hampton Court in England by 1665 – although no records would appear to have come to light as yet that would confirm this.

In Hawaii the flowers are woven into leis or garlands.

Javanese women have worn the flowers singly or wound as a circlet in their hair, and

Malaysian women have scented coconut (*Cocos nucifera*) hair oil with them.

The essence is a commercial ingredient for the perfumery industry.

The flowers are national emblems of both Indonesia (with butterfly orchid *Phalaenopsis amabilis* and monster plant *Rafflesia arnoldii*) and the Philippines.

Medicinally, the roots have been used in anaesthetics in some Asian countries, and in India the flowers are used by nursing mothers to stem the flow of milk after childbirth. Indian

medicine also uses a decoction of leaves and root to ease sore eyes, while a decoction of the leaves is used in Malaysia to treat fever.