

Lawsonia inermis

[Synonyms : *Lawsonia alba*]

HENNA (Arabic, English, German, Singhalese) is an evergreen shrub. Native to North Africa, Asia, Australia and particularly Arabia, Egypt, India and Iran, it has tiny, highly sweetly-scented, greenish-white or pinkish-yellow flowers.

It is also known as *Alcanna*, *Benjati* (Oriya), Camphire, Cypress shrub, Egyptian privet, *Gorinta* (Telugu), *Henné* (French), *Hinah* (Punjabi), *Hinna* (Persian), *Inai* (Malay), Jamaican mignonette, *Kuravaka* (Sanskrit), *Mailanchi* (Kannada), *Maruthani* (Tamil), *Maruthondi* (Tamil), *Mayilanji* (Malayalam), *Mehedi* (Bengali), *Mehndi* (Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi), *Mendee*, *Mendhi* (Urdu), *Mendika* (Sanskrit), Mignonette tree, *Mohuz* (Kashmiri), *Pachar kuku* (Javanese, Sundanese), *Pokokinai* (Malay), *Reseda*, *Shudu* (Chinese), Smooth lawsonia, *Tien kao* (Thai), Tree mignonette, and West Indian mignonette.

A perfume is extracted from the flowers.

Inermis is Latin (unarmed) meaning ‘spineless, unarmed or without prickles or stings’.

The leaves provide both dyes (a red dye and a yellow dye can be obtained) and a tea – and the dyes are not only used on human skin but also on wool and silk. A fragrant distilled water can be made from the flowers and this is used cosmetically.

In the East the red colouring that can be obtained from the leaves was believed to symbolize the fire and blood of the earth and thereby provide a link between man and nature. This has been significant for hundreds of years in both Eastern mysticism and religion, and the powdered dried leaves have been an ingredient in hair and skin preparations for over 5,000 years. Archaeologists found that nails (and hair) on mummies in some of the Egyptian tombs have been painted with the yellow dye. The powdered leaves (with hot water and lucerne, *Medicago sativa*, or catechu, *Acacia catechu*) are made into a paste which is spread or painted on the area to be covered and the dye is then left overnight to dry.

In earlier periods it was the fashion to hide age. Thus older people with white hair would achieve this by dyeing their hair jet black – with henna on the first night and indigo the following night.

Even today Islamic religious ritual and national or tribal customs require the dye to colour the cheeks, nails, palms of the hands, the soles of the feet and ladies’ hair and men’s beards. On their wedding eve Arabian women are given a sack of henna with which they make the thick paste to colour their hair and paint intricate patterns on their hands and feet, particularly before marriage ceremonies as henna symbolizes youth (with special seductive powers). Muslims give religious significance to a hennaed beard (Mohammed is said to have applied henna to his own beard), and some Berber families use henna not only to colour young babies but also to embalm their dead.

Henna has been used in Europe since 1890 for tinting hair. The wide geographical distribution of the plant, combined with henna’s adulteration (the addition of lucerne leaves, *Medicago sativa*, or powdered catechu, *Acacia catechu*), has led to a wide variation in both quality and composition of the highly respected dye. Of the varieties available Green henna from Iran is considered to be of the highest quality and gives a deep rich red,

Egyptian henna yields a more orange colour and the lowest quality, and Chinese henna is said to provide the least sought after colour.

The scented flowers should not be overlooked. Sprays used to be woven into garlands worn by young Egyptian women and can still be sold on the streets in the Middle East today. They have also been used to prepare a cosmetic toilet water.

Henna (the plant itself) is cultivated as hedging in some regions.

Aside from its primary use in hair colourings, and skin and nail dyes, henna is also used today for dyeing leather, and as an ingredient in perfumery.

In some parts of Asia the hard, grey wood has been used to make tool handles.

Medicinally, the plant's greatest use is in African folk medicine for the treatment of leprosy. It has also been used locally in remedies for skin disorders, jaundice and smallpox. From the flowers ancient Egyptians are said to have made an ointment and an oil which was applied to make limbs supple. Today it can still be recommended for some skin complaints, and the root is used in Arab medicine for treating nervous disorders generally, including hysteria.