

Lodoicea maldivica

[Synonyms : *Cocos maldivica*, *Lodoicea callipyge*, *Lodoicea maldavica*, *Lodoicea sechellarum*, *Lodoicea sechellarum*]

COCO-DE-MER (English, French) is a palm tree. Native to the Seychelles it has large fan-shaped green fronds and huge fruit.

It is also known as *Coco-fesse* (French), *Darya-ka-naryal* (Hindi), *Daryanunariyal* (Gujarati), Double coconut, Double coconut palm, *Jahari-naral* (Marathi), *Kadalthengai* (Tamil), *Kataltenna* (Malayalam), Maldive coconut, *Samudraputenkaya* (Telugu), Sea coconut, Seychelles nut palm, Seychelles palm nut tree, and *Ubdie-narikaylum* (Sanskrit).

Maldivica means ‘of or from the Maldives, a republican archipelago of over 1200 islands in the Indian Ocean, south-west of Sri Lanka’.

The Seychelles, to which coc-de-mer is native, are also in the Indian Ocean but near the East African coast unlike the Maldives (where it was believed to come from initially) which are much further east.

It is thought that the tree can survive for 600 to 800 years. A planted nut will take about two years to germinate, and the palm tree will normally be 15-20 years old before it flowers and fruits. One tree is able to bear up to 70 huge, clustered coconut-like, 2-lobed, hard-shelled, olive-green fruit at one time. Each husked fruit (which can take 10-12 months to mature) can weigh up to 50 lb. The seed inside is shaped like a woman’s pelvis and authorities say it is the largest known seed in the world. As yet it seems that botanists have been unable to work out how the plant is dispersed. Despite the incredible weight of the cumbersome seed (and the fact that it sinks in water) the palm has managed to distribute itself in its native habitat and could/can be seen growing on hillsides and hilltops.

Unfortunately today predictions of longevity are now unreliable as the palms are under threat not only from over collection but climate change as well. Coco-de-mer is an endangered species in the wild and monitoring in recent years has produced evidence of stunted growth in increasing temperatures. At the turn of the 20th and 21st Centuries its export from the Seychelles is prohibited and native trees are closely guarded when in fruit.

One other fascinating fact is that one is unlikely to get wet if sheltering from rain under one of these palms if close to the trunk. The very long leafstalks are channelled and, so that the bud in the centre of the crown does not get waterlogged, water falling on the palm tree’s leaves flows into the leafstalk channels and then down the trunk. The ground beneath the palm (for an area extending out to about 15 ft. from the trunk) apart from that immediately adjacent to the trunk will remain dry after a storm.

For centuries European sailors on the Indian Ocean came home with strange stories about amazing, huge nuts (or ‘fruit’) occasionally found floating in the sea (the emphasis must be on ‘occasionally’ as botanists state that they are normally so heavy that they sink in the water). Nobody knew where they came from and it was assumed that they must grow on trees on the seabed near Java (now an Indonesian island). Legends were told of how these trees occasionally surfaced but vanished when any sailor tried to pick the huge, coconut-like fruit. The seed’s suggestive shape made it desirable as an aphrodisiac and also encouraged the belief that it could not only provide a certain cure for many ailments

but that it was also a remarkable antidote for the most powerful poisons imaginable. This last gained such a following that it was contended that any poisoned food or drink placed in its empty shell would become harmless.

These rumours and legends spread far and wide and the nut came to be viewed as suitable only for the *élite*. In countries near the Indian Ocean any 'common man' found in possession of a fruit would have his hands chopped off. Further and further afield, rulers and potentates began to offer a 'king's ransom' for only one nut – not least because they were all susceptible to poisoning from rivals against whom it might offer them protection. Eventually these demands were even coming from Europe where one king is claimed to have offered a ship laden with precious goods for one nut. It is also alleged that the Austrian emperor, Rudolf II (1552-1612) indicated his willingness to pay 4,000 gold florins (a very large sum for those times although not a 'ransom') for one – all without success.

Then the bubble burst. In 1768 (some authorities say 1742) the palm tree was discovered on Praslin Island in the Seychelles. Myths, legends and desire rapidly and irrevocably disappeared in a puff of smoke and interest diminished to the level of relatively straightforward fascination and curiosity. Apparently the celebrated English soldier, Charles George Gordon (1833-1885) also known as 'Chinese Gordon', was one of the first to see this strange palm tree in a valley on the islands. The sight is said to have filled him with such pleasure and satisfaction that it is alleged he suggested that the valley be called the 'Garden of Eden'.

Locally the old leaves have been used for thatching while young leaves have been made into hats. The large fruit shells have provided the locals with bowls and water-vessels.

Coco-de-mer is believed to have been introduced to Sri Lanka in about 1850.

Medicinally, the fruit are used in India in the treatment of fever, diarrhoea, cholera and children's wind.