

*Mesua ferrea*

[Synonyms : *Calophyllum nagassarium*, *Mesua coromandalina*, *Mesua nagassarium*, *Mesua roxburghii*]

**COBRA'S SAFFRON** is an evergreen tree. Native to Indomalaysia it has thickish-petalled, particularly fragrant white flowers with many prominent yellow stamens.

It is also known as *Bosneak* (Cambodian), *Bun nak* (Thai), Ceylon ironwood tree, Gangaw, Indian ironwood, Indian rose chestnut, Ironwood tree, Mesua tree, *Na* (Burmese, Thai), *Na-gaha* (Singhalese), *Nagaheshara* (Sanskrit), *Naga sampige* (Tamil), *Nagchampo* (Gujarati), *Nageswar* (Oriya), *Naghesar* (Hindi), and *Penaga* (Malay).

The leaves are red before turning a glossy dark green.

Essential oil from the flowers is used with olive oil (*Olea europaea*) to prepare an attar known as Otto of nagkesar which is used in perfumery. The wood has pale white sapwood and dark red heartwood and is resistant to white ants.

*Ferrea* is derived from Latin *ferrum* (iron) meaning 'of iron or iron hard' with reference to the wood.

The scented flowers can be found in Indian bazaars. The flower buds and the open blooms and stamens are used to scent cosmetics and medicines – and locally especially the fragrant stamens are added to stuffing for the cushions and pillows on bridal beds.

Seed oil is used for lighting and in soap manufacture.

In India (and Malaysia) the tree is sacred and can often be found growing near Buddhist temples.

According to Indian Hindu legend one of the five arrows of the cupid god Kamadev was made of this tree's wood for an illusion of fragrance.

Today the tree is cultivated as an ornament, as a windbreak and as screening or hedging. It can be a familiar sight lining avenues from India to Java.

In the past the hard wood has been made into lance-handles and walking sticks and in Malaysia its strength was in demand in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century for tin-mining machinery. In India it has been used for making railway sleepers – and it has also provided material all over south-eastern Asia for a wide range of other uses from constructing buildings, bridges, piers and piling (as well as boat-building, flooring, well construction and making heavy furniture) to its use for bows, axles, tool handles, golf club heads, gunstocks and musical instruments.

Authorities on south-eastern Asia believe that the timber is the most valued part of the tree today. After this however it is also widely respected in the region for its vegetable oil, essential oil and medicinal virtues, as well as for its tannin, resin, poisonous and insecticidal properties and its grace in hedge or wayside.

Medicinally, local herbalists have used a decoction of various parts of the tree (varying in different south-east Asian countries) during childbirth and have also applied it to wounds. The dried flowers have featured as an ingredient in Hindu and Javanese medicine particularly. The leaves and flowers have provided a local remedy for snake bites and scorpion stings. Powdered leaves have also been an ingredient in treatments for leprosy.