

Musa textilis

MANILA HEMP is a perennial. Suspected as being a cultivated variety from the Philippines, it has flowers surrounded by red to purple outside, paler inside petal-like leaves (bracts). It is also known as Abaca (English, French), *Banánovník vláknitý* (Czech), *Banán textilný* (Slovak), *Cañaño de Manila* (Spanish), *Chanvre de Manille* (French), *Faserbanane* (German), Giant pisang, *Manilahanf* (German), and *Peyanvali* (Tamil).

The bases of the leaves sheath each other (like a leek, *Allium ampeloprasum* var. *porrum*) to form a green pseudo-stem from which fibre is extracted. The female flowers are found towards the base of the flower spike.

Textilis is Latin (web, woven, textile) meaning ‘used in weaving or interwoven’.

It is believed that the fibre in the pseudo-stems (leaf bases) has been used in the Philippines for thousands of years but it only reached the notice of the West in the 17th Century. For some authorities responsibility for drawing it to European attention appears to rest with the English navigator and pirate, William Dampier (1652-1715). When he sailed west across the Pacific in the 1680s after seizing a Danish ship off Sierra Leone on the west African coast one of his brief stops was on the Philippines’ second largest island, Mindinao. Here he saw this fibre being made into cloth.

In 1768 the Filipinos were cultivating the perennial for its fibre at the Spaniards’ behest – and by 1818 exports had reached 41 tons annually. (By the mid-20th Century these had risen further to at least 10,000 tons.) Manila hemp proved to be difficult to grow successfully outside its native habitat and the trials carried out in other countries in south-eastern Asia during the first half of the 19th Century proved to be unsuccessful and this experience continued for another 100 years. It was not until 1960 that manila hemp began to be grown on a commercial scale outside the Philippines in Malaysian Sabah and offered the chance of a challenge to the exports from the plant’s native habitat. Today varieties are grown successfully elsewhere including in tropical American countries.

This natural fibre is remarkable for its strength, flexibility and water resistance (both fresh and salt water). In the West the fibre’s primary use has been in making ropes and cables especially for marine use (today often superseded by other stronger modern materials) but it has also been made into paper. During their Civil War (1861-1865) the Americans ran short of suitable material for making paper and turned to this plant. They called the paper from this Manilla paper suitable for special applications such as papier mâché and wrapping paper. This name migrated to other papers and explains the incorrectly applied name ‘Manilla envelope’ familiar to many still today.

The fibre is also used for making a wide range of items including twine, teabags, cigarette filters, security paper for currencies, sausage wrappings and the ‘paper’ walls of Japanese homes. As already mentioned it has long been used locally in the Philippines to make textiles including a lustrous cloth known as ‘sinamy’. Both the Filipinos and the Swiss use the sinamy for making hats. (The Swiss hats are braided and are white to reddish-yellow.) The fibre is also used for making baskets, matting, wickerwork furniture, trays, belts and laces.

Authorities on south-eastern Asia suggest unsurprisingly that manila hemp’s greatest contribution to the region is as a source of fibre.

Medicinally, local herbalists in parts of India have used the roots for treating worms.