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Ochroma pyramidale

[Synonyms : *Bombax pyramidale*, *Ochroma boliviana*, *Ochroma lagopus*, *Ochroma lagopus* var. *bicolor*, *Ochroma lagopus* var. *occigranatensis*, *Ochroma limonensis*, *Ochroma peruviana*, *Ochroma pyramidale* var. *bicolor*, *Ochroma pyramidale* var. *concolor*, *Ochroma tomentosa* var. *ibarrensis*]

BALSA (English, German) is an evergreen tree. Native to tropical America it has large white flowers.

It is also known as *Corcho* (Mexican), Cork tree, Cork wood, Cotton tree, Down tree, *Enea* (Costa Rican), *Gatillo* (Nicaraguan), Guano, *Lana* (Panamanian), *Palo de balsa* (Peruvian), *Pau de balsa* (Brazilian), *Pung* (Costa Rican), *Tami* (Bolivian), West Indian balsa, West Indian corkwood, and Woolly tree.

The tree is pollinated by bats.

Dry wood weighs 10 lb. per foot. (There are other trees that have as light a wood as balsa (or lighter) but these alternatives usually have relative disadvantages from the point of view of commercial exploitation, especially accessibility.)

Pyramidale means ‘pyramid-shaped’.

The name Balsa is a Spanish word that means ‘raft’.

Indians of Middle and South America made their ocean-going rafts from balsa and in 1947 the Norwegian anthropologist, Thor Heyerdahl (1914-2002), used balsa (nine trees each nearly 3 ft. diameter at the base) to build his raft *Kon Tiki* for his voyage from Peru to the Tuamato Islands near Tahiti. He proved that it was perfectly credible for the Peruvians to have sailed long distances – even as far as Polynesia which could account for some of the introduced plants found there. Today balsa is still used by some local fishermen especially in Ecuador.

The famous Mosquito combat aircraft flown in World War II was built primarily from other wood and balsa, between veneers of birch (*Betula*), to make its streamlined shell. Balsa wood has also been used on the one hand for making life rafts and on the other for surgical splints.

Today balsa provides insulation material for cold storage ships and is used in the manufacture of life-saving equipment, model aeroplanes, floats, and life rafts. It is also chosen for making fruit packing cases as well as toys. The seed down is used for stuffing pillows.