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Phyllanthus emblica

[Synonyms : *Diasperus emblica*, *Dichelactina nodicaulis*, *Emblica officinalis*, *Phyllanthus mairei*]

EMBLIC is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to tropical Asia it has directly from the trunk or branches clusters of tiny, inconspicuous, yellowish-green flowers.

It is also known as *Adiphala* (Sanskrit), *Amalaka* (Sanskrit), *Amalakamu* (Telugu), *Amalki* (Sanskrit), *Amla* (Bengali, Hindi, Marathi), *Amlaka* (Malaysian), *Amlakam* (Malaylam), *Amalakee* (Bengali), *Amlika* (Sanskrit), *Amloki* (Bengali), *Amran* (Gujarati), *Aonla* (Hindi), *Aora* ((Oriya), *Arnala* (Gujarati), *Asam melaka* (Malaysian), *Bong ngot* (Vietnamese), *Chukna amlaki* (Assamese), *Chu me* (Vietnamese), *Dhatri* (Sanskrit), *Emblic myrobalan*, *Indian gooseberry*, *Kam lam* (Cambodian), *Kam lam ko* (Cambodian), *Ma-kham-pom* (Thai), *Mak-kham-pom* (Lao), *Malacca tree*, *Melaka* (Malaysian, Sanskrit), *Me rùng* (Vietnamese), *Myrobalan*, *Nelli* (Filipino/Tagalog, Malayalam, Sanskrit, Tamil), *Nellikai* (Tamil), *Nellikaya* (Tamil), *Vayasya* (Sanskrit), and *Yau kam chi* (Chinese).

The green leaflets (which are pink-tinged when young) have a lemony smell. Flower clusters emerge below the leaflets around the lower part of the stem. The small gooseberry-like, drying whitish- or yellowish-green (occasionally reddish) fruit will split explosively to expel the seeds. Authorities note that although the thirst-quenching fruit are a very rich source of vitamin C (greater than that available in citrus fruit) it is not easily retained during cooking. The initial acid taste of the fruit turns sweet.

In some parts of India emblic has been declared an endangered species in the wild – whereas in Australia it is viewed as potentially invasive.

Emblica could be derived from Persian *amlah* or Arabic *ambalji*.

Although the fruit are eaten raw, more often they are used to make a stiff jelly and confectionery, or pickles, chutneys, relishes and other preserves. In Indonesia the fruit have been cooked with sugar until the mixture crystallizes and forms a syrup – and like fruit from close relatives they are also used in jam-making as they help other fruit to set.

In Thailand particularly some wild deer have fed on the fruit. More widely the foliage is harvested as fodder for cattle.

Emblic's versatility is well illustrated by south-eastern Asian authorities. They believe that emblic's importance in the region is firstly as a tannin-producing plant. After that it is valued as a source of edible fruit and flavouring, as a medicinal plant, a timber tree, a dye-producing plant, a fuel plant and an ornamental.

For the Hindus of northern India the tree is sacred. The leaves, flowers and fruit are used in religious ritual – and different parts of the tree are recommended for an extensive range of uses according to traditional medicinal systems. Also 40 days after fasting believers are urged to eat the ripe fruit to regain their fitness.

In India, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Thailand emblic is widely cultivated as an ornamental plant and shade tree and even as a cash crop.

The pale greyish-brown bark, the fruit and leaflets are used for tanning (particularly in India) and the bark has also been used for dyeing fishing nets. The dye from the fruit and

leaflets is light or yellowish-brown when used on silk or wool – and black when iron is added.

The dried fruit have not only provided a shampoo but also a hair dye (as well as ink). An oil can also be extracted from the fruit and in India this is popular as a hair restorative and is often an ingredient in shampoos there. In fact it has also penetrated the hair product market in other countries, not least the southern United States.

The leaves are believed to make a good green manure and branches are often lopped to this end. (Sometimes the leaves have provided a manure for the shrubs growing in cardamom (*Elettaria cardamomum*) plantations.)

The red wood has provided a dye and has been made into charcoal and burnt as fuel as well. Authorities note that the wood will split and warp easily and that this limits its uses. Despite this however it has been made into furniture, tools, gunstocks, tobacco pipes and hookahs. Its durability under water has recommended it as being suitable on a small scale for braces in water wells and for building rudimentary aqueducts.

A pillow stuffing has been made from the dried leaflets.

Records suggest that emblic is often the only tree to be seen on some of the hills in Hong Kong as all others have disappeared for firewood. What may have saved them from the same fate is their fruit. Ha ka women eat them to slake their thirst when they are cutting the Winter grass growing on the slopes beneath the trees. Once gathered this is sold in the villages in the valleys below. In fact this practice (with the fruit) seems to be repeated throughout the region wherever emblic grows. People working nearby rely on it as a thirst-quencher. According to some reports in Thailand the tree is left standing when all others around it have been felled – and thirsty bus-passengers have even been let off just to scramble for the fruit.

Despite 'rave notices' attracted by the tree in south-eastern Asia (especially India and perhaps Malaysia) it seems to have evaded such enthusiasm outside this region. Records show that the United States Department of Agriculture acquired seeds in 1901 (apparently from an importer in Florida) and distributed these widely (from Bermuda, Cuba, Panama, Puerto Rico, and Trinidad, to Hawaii and even the Philippines) with minimal reaction. A minor surge of interest in 1945 created by the intimation that Vitamin C levels were high was dashed in favour of another fruit which was found to contain more. A bubble of enthusiasm bloomed in 1954 when an international soup company began some research into the fruit but this subsided too. Then in 1982 some plants were cultivated in Australia (from seed obtained from the United States) – but again nothing.

Medicinally, local Indian herbalists have recommended liquor from the fermented fruit for treating jaundice, wind and coughs (and have also used the dried fruit to stem bleeding, and as a treatment for diarrhoea or dysentery). In Indian medicine the fruit juice is also used in aphrodisiacs. Combined with iron the dried fruit have offered a remedy in Asian medicine for (in addition to the foregoing) anaemia, fever, wind and skin disorders. (Some records note that Indian military personnel were issued with powdered emblic, often in tablet or sweet form, as Vitamin C rations during the Second World War in the first half of the 20th Century.) The seeds have been turned to for treatments for asthma, bronchitis, fever and diabetes, as well as for easing acidity – and the roots, leaves and seeds have featured in Chinese medicine.