

*Picrasma excelsa*

[Synonyms : *Aeschrion excelsa*, *Pacrasma excelsa*, *Picraena amara*, *Picraena excelsa*, *Quassia excelsa*, *Quassia pentandra*, *Quassia polygama*, *Simarouba glauca*, *Simaruba excelsa*]

**QUASSIA** is a deciduous tree. Native to the West Indies (particularly Antigua, St. Vincent and the lower mountains and plains of Jamaica) and tropical America, it has small pale yellowish-green flowers.

It is also known as Bitter ash, Bitter bark, Bitter wood, *Jamaicakvassia* (Swedish), Jamaican quassia, Paradise tree, Quassia chips, and Quassia of Jamaica.

The white wood turns yellow upon exposure to air.

Warning – large doses can cause vomiting and can irritate the stomach.

*Excelsa* means ‘tall or high’.

Quassia has been added to the traditional English preserve, marmalade, as it is said to accentuate the taste. At one time the wood was roasted, powdered and used to make ale bitter instead of hops. It has also provided a flavouring for wines. Today an extract is used by the drinks industry in apéritifs, tonics, bitters, fizzy drinks and brewing beer.

As an insecticide extracts of quassia mixed with sugar have supplied a solution for sprays and for coating fly-papers – and quassia is still used in commercial insecticides today.

In the late 1700s it was to supersede Surinam quassia (*Quassia amara* – a relative with similar qualities that is still recognized in Continental Europe today) in the imports into Britain and North America. The white wood used to be shipped in the form of one foot diameter logs (several feet long) and in some European pharmacies it used to be the practice to sell cups made from it. The idea was that these would be filled with water or tonic which was then allowed to stand for a few minutes to absorb some of the wood’s enhancing qualities. Today a drug is extracted from wood chips.

Medicinally, herbalists have recommended it for treating fever and indigestion, and as a tonic during convalescence. Extracts have also been used to treat threadworms.