

Platanus orientalis

[Synonyms : *Platanus cuneata*, *Platanus digitata*, *Platanus digitifolia*, *Platanus orientalis*, *Platanus vulgaris*]

ORIENTAL PLANE is a deciduous tree. Found in Asia Minor and eastern Europe it has greenish catkins.

It is also known as *Asiatische Platane* (German), Chennar tree, *Chinar* (Hindi), Oriental plane tree, Plane tree, *Platane d'Orient* (French), *Plátano* (Spanish), *Plátanos* (Greek), and *Platan východní* (Czech); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of genius, magnificence, ornamentation, and shelter.

The leaves have stems that are enlarged at the base unlike those of the maple (*Acer*).

Warning – skin irritation can be caused by the downy material that floats from the fruits.

Orientalis means ‘of or from the East’.

The plane tree was familiar to both the ancient Greeks and the Romans. Greek mythology dedicates the tree to Zeus while in Roman mythology it is dedicated to his counterpart, Jupiter. When Xerxes who ruled Persia as king from 486 to 465 BC was marching his men across Greece, legend describes how he delayed them for days while he contemplated the beauty of the plane tree. Shortly after Xerxes’ death Hippocrates (c.460-377 or 359) the celebrated Greek physician was born. He is often referred to as the ‘Father of Medicine’ and not only contributed several of the 72 treaties which collectively form what has come to be called the *Hippocratic Corpus* – but he also gave his name to the Western medical profession’s ‘Hippocratic Oath’. According to some European tradition that Oath used to be made under a plane tree on the Island of Cos.

The plane tree most familiar to many today is actually a hybrid of *Platanus orientalis* that according to some was first introduced to Britain in about 1670 in Oxford. Although the plane tree is a common and well-loved sight in London now (as it is no less in village squares in Mediterranean Countries) it seems that during William Turner’s lifetime (c.1510-1568) any species of this genus may have been a rare sight in England. This English clergyman, physicist and naturalist noted that he had only seen one tree in Northumberland and one near Cambridge during his travels about the Country. Yet only a relatively short time later William Shakespeare (1564-1616), the celebrated English playwright, poet and actor/manager, must have seen a sufficient number of them to enable him to refer to the tree in the tragi-comedy he wrote in about 1613 with John Fletcher (1579-1625) *Two Noble Kinsmen*,

..... I have sent him where a cedar
Higher than all the rest, spreads like a plane
Fast by a brook.

for it to have significant relevance for the audiences of that day.

The reddish-brown wood was once used for coachbuilding but it is rarely chosen for today but on the few occasions it is called upon it is used for cabinetwork.

The branches and roots yield a fabric dye.

Medicinally, a species known as a dwarf plane was recommended by herbalists for treating eye ailments and toothache. (The ancient Greeks used it to treat snake bites and inflammation.)

It is the birthday flower for 24th October.