

Spathodea campanulata

[Synonyms : *Bignonia tulipifera*, *Jacaranda acutifolia*, *Jacaranda ovalifolia*, *Spathodea danckelmaniana*, *Spathodea nilotica*, *Spathodea tulipifera*]

FLAME TREE is an evergreen tree (deciduous in some regions). Native to tropical west Africa it has yellow-edged orange-scarlet flowers each with protruding yellow stamens. It is also known as African flame tree, African spathodea, African tulip tree, *Afrikanischer Tulpenbaum* (German), *Afrikanskt Tulpanträd* (Swedish), *Afrikansk Tulipantræ* (Danish), *Baton du Sorcier* (Malagasy), Bell flambeau tree, *Chama da Floresta* (Portuguese), *Espatódea* (Portuguese, Spanish), Fireball, Flambeau tree, Flame of the forest, Fountain tree, *Gabun-Tulpenbaum* (German), *Khae-daeng* (Thai), *Immortel étranger* (French), *Kokornsu* (Ashanti), Nandi flame, Nile flame tree, *Nirukavi* (Kannada), *Orurur* (Nigerian), *Osisiriw* (Twi), *Panchut-panchut* (Malay), *Patadi* (Tamil, Telugu), Rhodesian flame tree, Scarlet bell, Scarlet fountain tree, Sorcerer's wand, *Spathodea*, *Spathodea zvonkovitá* (Czech), *Spathodée* (French), Squirt tree, Syringe tree, *Tulipán Africano* (Spanish), *Tulpenboom* (Dutch), *Tulipero del Gabon* (Canary Island), *Tulipier du Gabon* (French), Tulip tree, Uganda flame tree, and West African tulip tree.

The innermost buds of the clusters of flowers are the last to open and as the buds contain water under pressure pollinating birds have to be wary. If they puncture one of the buds a squirt of water will be released. A flower lasts for about 3 days. The woody, dark brown capsular fruit contain about 470 papery, white seeds. The seeds are dispersed over long distances by the wind.

Campanulata is derived from Latin *campana* (bell) meaning 'bell-shaped' with reference to the flower shape.

The ripe fruit are especially enjoyed by bats which will congregate on the trees at night and feast on them to the accompaniment of penetrating cracking noises. This cacophony can be so great as to preclude sleep for any hapless creatures within range and a measure of this is witnessed in the fact that in some parts of Africa formal warnings have been given not to plant the trees in range of homes, hospitals or schools. In contrast to the tree's great beauty it also has one other, sometimes dangerous, disadvantage. Not only are the trunks of old trees hollow but the leaf twigs and branches are vulnerable to damage in high wind. It is often recommended for this latter reason that they are not planted too close to habitation or roads in wind-prone areas as well.

As a provider of firewood the tree is said to be hopeless. So much so that the Ashanti tribe have recorded the fact in a proverb. However the wood has been used for carpentry and it has also been mooted as a possible source of paper pulp.

In some areas of its native Africa flame tree has been vested with supernatural powers. Not only has the wood been used for witch-doctors' wands and tribal drums played in various rituals but the blossom also had a grim meaning for lawbreakers. The blooms were placed and remained outside a criminal's hut until his death from whatever cause. The flowers were then buried in the grave with him so that his spirit could not re-enter his body.

Flame tree is said to have been discovered first in 1787 in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) by a French explorer, Ambroise Palisot Beauvois (1755-1820). Since then it has been grown as a shade or street tree in several countries. It is thought to have been introduced to

Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) from Angola in about 1873 but it would seem that there are no records of its first appearance in India. It graces some of the streets in the towns on the Canary Islands, especially on Tenerife and the tree can also be seen now in the Caribbean.

These are the trees referred to in the title of a modern novel *The Flame Trees of Thika* written by the Kenyan-born Englishwoman, Elspeth Huxley (1907-1997).

Medicinally, the bark has been used locally in remedies for stomach ailments and constipation, and it has been turned to for healing sores.