

Swietenia mahagoni

[Synonyms : *Cedrela mahagoni*, *Cedrela mahogani*, *Swietenia acutifolia*, *Swietenia fabrilis*, *Swietenia macrophylla*, *Swietenia macrophylla* var. *praecociflora*, *Swietenia mahogani*, *Swietenia mahogoni*]

MAHOGANY is a semi-evergreen tree. Native to tropical America it has tiny fragrant, greenish-yellow flowers.

It is also known as *Acajou* (French), Big-leaved mahogany, Broad-leaved mahogany, *Caoba* (Spanish), Caoba mahogany, Caribbean mahogany, Common mahogany, Cuba mahogany, Dominican mahogany, Honduras mahogany, Madeira redwood, *Mahagani* (Hindi), *Mahagoni* (German), *Mahagono* (Esperanto), *Mahogoni* (German), *Mahok* (Dutch), *Rata-Kohomba* (Singhalese), San Domingo mahogany, South American mahogany, Spanish mahogany, Tabosa mahogany, True mahogany, West Indian mahogany, and West Indies mahogany.

From at least January 2002 mahogany has been included under Appendix II of CITES. This means that authorities believe this species will be seriously threatened if it is over-harvested and therefore trade in it should be monitored and controlled. Governments are required to issue export licences to certify that this species was legally acquired and that its exportation does not threaten the survival of that species in the wild there.

Mahagoni is derived from a local American Indian name.

This tree provides an example of what some refer to dramatically as ‘genetic erosion’ as only the best trees in the wild were felled for export and smaller trees were chopped down for local consumption (for making railway sleepers and fence posts, and for firewood for the sugar mills and steam trains). This indiscriminate use drastically depleted the natural mahogany population to the point that in 1946 Cuba, Haiti and the Dominican Republic all prohibited mahogany log exports. At the beginning of the 21st Century the wild stock is understood to be of very poor quality. Current ‘mahogany’ now comes from other species including a close relative also native to tropical America, the Large-leaved Honduras, or Mexican mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*).

Philip II (1527-1598) was on the Spanish throne when Europeans first came across the wood on the island of Hispaniola (shared today by the Dominican Republic and Haiti). It was then being used by the indigenous Indian tribes for making their canoes and the European seamen returned to Spain with some of the hard and heavy wood as a gift for the King. Apparently this was fashioned into furniture. Initially the Europeans used mahogany on the sailing ships that crossed the Atlantic to the West Indies. Not least among sailors to authorise mahogany for repairs was Sir Walter Raleigh (1552-1618), the famous English courtier, navigator and poet. But demand began to crystallize as the beauty of the seasoned wood was appreciated. Interest spread and during Elizabeth I's (1533-1603) reign the English were among those who recognized it as a desirable cabinet wood. From this beginning Jamaica began to establish what eventually became a lucrative export trade in mahogany. Among the first furniture makers to revel in it were the two famous Englishmen, Thomas Chippendale (1718-1779) and George Hepplewhite (died 1786). This wood was also prized for building interiors as well as continuing its use for ship and boat-building.

It is claimed by some authorities that the oldest surviving example of the use of mahogany's wood dates from 1550 and can be found in the Dominican Republic's Cathedral in Santo Domingo.

The flower is a national emblem of Dominica.

Authorities believe that mahogany was introduced to India in 1795 and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in about 1840.

The wood has been used for boatbuilding, turning, carving, veneering and interior finishing, as well as for making furniture and musical instruments.

Medicinally, the bark has been used locally as a quinine (*Cinchona officinalis*) substitute in treating fevers.