

*Tamarindus indica*

[Synonyms : *Tamarindus occidentalis*, *Tamarindus officinalis*, *Tamarindus umbrosa*]

**TAMARIND** is a hybrid semi-evergreen or evergreen tree. Probably native to tropical Africa, parts of tropical Asia and to Madagascar, it has dark red buds that become small fragrant, orchid-like, red-veined, pale yellow-orange flowers.

It is also known as *Ambli* (Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Sanskrit), *Amilam* (Tamil), *Amlam* (Malayalam), *Amlī* (Kannada, Marathi), *Ardeb* (Arabic), *Asam jawa* (Malay), *Chinch* (Kannada, Marathi), *Chinthappandu-chinta* (Telugu), *Imlee* (Hindi), *Imli* (Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu), Indian date, Indian tamarind, *Ma-kham* (Thai), *Me* (Vietnamese), *Mkwaju* (Swahili), *Puli* (Malayalam, Tamil), *Sampálok* (Filipino/Tagalog), *Sauerdattel* (German), *Taetul* (Bengali), *Tamar-i-hind* (Arabic), *Tamarin* (Creole, French), *Tamarinde* (Dutch, German), *Tamarindenbaum* (German), *Tamarindo* (Italian, Spanish), *Tamarinier* (French), *Tangkal asam* (Sundanese), *Teetuli* (Oriya), *Tintrini* (Sanskrit), *Ttali* (Assamese), and *Wit asem* (Javanese).

The leaves fold not only at night but also in advance of damp weather.

Oil can be extracted from the fruit.

*Indica* means ‘of or from India or the East Indies or the Far East’.

Tamarind was familiar to the Arabs especially for its medicinal qualities and although the tree is a native of tropical Africa the Arabs introduced it to Europe via India. This may explain in part why in the Western psyche today tamarind tends to be associated most with India.

In India where it is also native it is grown as an ornamental shade tree and can be a familiar sight along roadsides. In some parts of the sub-continent it was believed that nothing would grow under it and that it exhaled acid at night making it unsafe to sleep beneath. This idea may have arisen because hundreds of years ago tamarind groves were avoided for camping when it was found that underneath them tent cloth became damaged from the acid in the falling or fallen leaves – for which reason also few plants thrive successfully in the tamarind’s shade.

The very-hard and durable wood has been used for buildings and sugar mills, as well as for making tools and equipment such as mallets and presses. It also yields a charcoal suitable for gunpowder. Seed husks have provided material for road-surfacing and the seeds themselves have yielded a cheap size for treating material.

Oil from the fruit has been used as an ingredient in making soap.

The fruit pods keep well and in past centuries, as an alternative to lime (*Citrus aurantiifolia*) or lemon (*Citrus limon*) juice, sailors ate them on long sea voyages as a source of Vitamin C i.e. a scurvy preventative. In South America and the Caribbean (particularly Jamaica) a syrup made from the fruit pulp has long been used to prepare soft drinks and in the latter they have also been used to make punch. In parts of the Caribbean and also in the Philippines the fruit or the peel are candied. The salted fruit pulp was exported to Europe from Java (now part of Indonesia) in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and this was superseded in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century by imports from the West Indies – but the fruit pulp from the latter was supplemented with sugar instead of salt. This fruit pulp (more often than not salted) is often an ingredient in hot spicy Indian food and in chutney – and the fruit themselves

have offered India an important trading commodity both domestically and for export as well.

For Indians young leaves have provided a vegetable and in times of famine the seeds have also been a source of food. Indians have eaten the flowers in hot spicy dishes, as have the Thais who view them as a vegetable. The skinned seeds are also eaten fried or boiled in India and on occasion they have been ground to a flour. They contain pectin and have long been used to help jams to set too.

The powdered seeds have another use. Apparently they provide one of the strongest wood cements and material sizes if they are mixed into glue. As a material size the mixture is particularly associated with jute (*Corchorus capsularis*) and cotton (*Gossypium*).

The fruit flesh has been used to clean metal receptacles generally. More specifically however authorities note that in the form of an infusion combined with seawater it has been of particular value in cleaning silver.

The leaves have been fed to a species of silkworm.

A dark brown coloured dye can be obtained from the bark and in the past this has been used in west Africa for hunters' clothing. The leaves provide a red woollen dye, and with indigo they yield a green silk dye. The fruit pulp has also been used for dyeing in parts of Indonesia.

In Java (now part of Indonesia) the bark has been burnt to make an ink used for staining the teeth.

The wood has been collected locally and burnt as fuel.

In veterinary medicine, the bark and fruit have been used in Malaysia to treat stomach pain in elephants.

Pulp extract is used today on a commercial basis for making drinks, thirst-quenching syrups, caramels and sauces eg. Worcestershire sauce,. It is also used as a flavouring by the pharmaceutical industry. The roots are used to make walking sticks and the mottled, purplish brown or black heartwood is made into furniture.

Medicinally, parts of the plant have been employed in varying ways in different countries. In convalescent diets the fruit pulp has been made into drinks (it has a slightly laxative effect which is said to be destroyed by cooking) and it has also been used to treat dysentery and rheumatism, and to alleviate nausea during pregnancy. A decoction of the leaves has been taken internally as a remedy for fevers, jaundice and ringworms, and applied externally to soothe sore eyes and skin ulcers. The edible flowers have provided a remedy for countering the smell of perspiration, and the bark has been valued as a remedy for asthma and diarrhoea.