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### *Tectona grandis*

[Synonyms : *Tectona theka*, *Theka grandis*]

**TEAK** (English, German) is a deciduous tree. Native from India to Laos it has minute fragrant, mauve and white flowers.

It is also known as *Ching-jagu* (Assamese), *Djati* (German), Indian oak, *Jati* (Malay), *Kyun* (Burmese), *Peddatchu* (Telugu), *Sag* (Gujarati, Marathi), *Sagun* (Hindi), *Saguna* (Bengali), *Sagwan* (Hindi, Marathi, Punjabi), *Sak* (Thai), *Saka* (Sanskrit), *Teakbaum* (German), *Teca* (Spanish), *Teck* (French), *Tekka* (Malayalam), and *Tekku* (Tamil).

Warning – dust from working the wood can cause dermatitis.

The trees are usually girdled when they are harvested. This means that a ring of living tissue and bark is removed near the base and the tree is left to die and to stand for 2-3 years. (Unless teak is dried it will sink in water.) The dead trees are then extracted, traditionally by elephants – and floated down river.

*Grandis* is Latin (great, large) meaning ‘large or showy’.

There are many examples in south-eastern Asia of teak’s remarkable durability. Perhaps the most famous one can be seen in the Karla Caves (tunnelled out of solid rock), a Buddhist pilgrimage centre near Lonaula (east of Mumbai in India, familiar in the past to Westerners as Bombay) that is believed to date back to 160 BC. Its massive Chaitya (prayer) hall has a ceiling lined with teak now over 2000 years old – while the wood found in some of the ruined temples within teak’s native habitat is generally younger (between one and two thousand years old). No greater proof is needed to show that teak was prized locally long before export demand was a consideration.

In Java (now part of Indonesia) fishing boats have long been made from the wood – as were Javanese homes. But even in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century the Dutch who controlled the Island then realized the finite nature of the available teak, forbade its use for local building on the Island and brought felling under control.

During the late 18<sup>th</sup> and at various times in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century many unsuccessful attempts were made in different places in India (as well as other countries in south-eastern Asia) to cultivate teak in plantations. Some of them, like the one on the banks of the Hugli River near Calcutta, and another later in 1800 on Penang (now in western Malaysia) were sited close to shipbuilding yards – an indication of the importance of the wood at that time.

This demand has all led to its native scarcity. However despite any previous difficulties in husbandry authorities note that it is one of the woods that can thrive in viably managed forests and plantations. Today in Britain teak from such regions is now included in the ‘Good Wood Guide’ drawn up by that Country’s National Association of Retail Furnishers and Friends of the Earth.

Burma, referred to today as Myanmar, has supplied the major part of the world teak market with wood of the highest quality.

This strong and moderately hard wood is used today in general and building construction, and for building interiors and staircases. It is also made into railway sleepers, bridges, piling, ships and boats, decking, poles, flooring and furniture.

Teak is believed to have been introduced to Indonesia between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in 1680 and Barbados in 1799.

The leaves have been used locally as wrapping (packaging material) in various countries. In Java (now part of Indonesia) for instance they have been used to wrap fermenting soya beans (*Glycine max*).

The bark (and in some places the young leaves) yields a yellow dye that is used locally for basketwork. The distilled wood provides a varnish.

Although most of the uses for the wood have already been referred to there is one unusual one as yet omitted. Teak is impervious to acids and has therefore been appreciated for making items that demand this unusual quality.

Medicinally, nut oil has been used in India to promote hair growth, powdered wood has been employed in internal remedies for worms, and external cures for swellings. It has also been used locally to treat malaria, fevers and skin complaints.