

“False” and “True” Ashokas

Mast tree

Common names: Mast tree, “False” Ashoka, Cemetery tree, Asoothi, Arana, Asopalav
Scientific name: *Polyalthia longifolia* var *pendula*

The Mast tree– often confused with the sita-ashok tree – is native to Sri Lanka and South India.



The tree often has a conical/ pyramidal appearance and branches that droop. Its leaves are long, slim, glossy, and lance shaped. The mast tree has yellowish green non-fragrant flowers that are covered by the foliage and grow in February and March. It has green fruit in clusters of 10-120 that, when ripe, become purple. Bats often eat these fruits, as do monkeys, while the leaves are consumed by some butterflies as larval food.



Uses

The mast tree is often used for ornamental purposes. The leaves are used in marriage ceremonies, and adorn gateways and doors.

The mast tree is considered sacred and is commonly grown near temples.

The tree is used in traditional medicine (like Ayurveda). The bark is used for fever, diabetes, hypertension, skin diseases, etc. Studies have found that parts of the tree show anticancer, antimicrobial, antiulcer, and antiinflammatory activity.

Mast trees are often used as avenue trees, as they provide dense shade and help

reduce noise pollution.

The wood is used in the making of drums in South India, and is also used to make pencil boxes. Previously, the wood was also used to make masts for ships, hence giving rise to the name “mast tree.”

Read on to learn about the Sita Ashoka or “True” Ashoka.

Sita Ashoka

Common name: Sita Ashok, “True” Ashoka, Tamra Pallava, Tamra Patra

Saraca asoca

The ‘sorrowless’ tree



Some say the sita-ashok, a small and evergreen tree, is India’s most beautiful tree. Unlike the “false” ashoka tree, the sita ashok has clusters of bright red fragrant flowers (yellow orangish when young) that do not possess true petals and have long stamens. The fruit are pods that are pink when young. The tree has compound leaves with about 3-7 pairs of narrow leaflets. New leaves are first pink and then purple due to lack of chlorophyll.

The ashoka is considered a “vulnerable” species as it is dwindling.

Medicinal Properties

The bark is used in traditional Indian medicine. The tree is used for uterine issues, stomach aches, menstrual problems, gynecological problems, skin issues, and to purify the blood.

Parts of the Sita Ashoka– like the leaves and flowers– contain phytochemicals like alkaloids, tannins, flavonoids, steroids, saponins, etc. They are hence being studied for their medicinal value.

Research suggests that it has antimennorrhagic, oxytocic, antibacterial, anticancer, antiinflammatory, cardioprotective, antioxidant, hypolipidemic, dermaprotective effects, to name a few.

Religious Significance



The Sita Ashok is considered sacred for Hindus (its flowers are offered to Shiva) and Buddhists (some say that Lord Buddha was born under a Sita Ashoka).

The Sita Ashoka is connected to the Ramayana. Sita is said to have taken shelter under the Sita Ashok when captured by Ravan.

On Chaitra Shukla Ashtami, women eat 8 leaves of the Ashoka tree so that they can conceive a child. Married women eat buds to protect their children.

Some believe that the tree only blooms when the foot of a beautiful maiden touches the tree.

Ashoka means sorrowless. The tree is named as such because it is believed to keep women youthful and healthy.