

A Tree for All Reasons



Unripe divul have a greyish white, tough pericarp

While the fruit of the homely divul tree gladdens the palate, its bark, leaves, wood and roots supply native physicians with a wealth of medicinal ingredients

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At first glance, you may find the divul tree somewhat unremarkable. But don't be fooled by appearances. This nondescript deciduous woody perennial that proliferates throughout Sri Lanka has as many uses as it has names.

Divul (*Limonia acidissima*, of the family Rutaceae) is native to the Indomalaya and Indochina eco-regions. In India, the divul is called bilin, kait, kaitha, bhenta, batbel, kavitha, kath bel, bela, nayi bel and more. Malaysians call it gelinggai or belinggai. To the Thais, it is makhwit. It is kramsang in Cambodia, mafit in Laos, and kawista or kico in Java. The French call it pomme d'elephant, pomme de bois, and citron des mois. Even the English are undecided, calling it elephant apple, wood apple, curd fruit and monkey fruit. Rarely has a tree had to contend with so many names.

Abundant across Sri Lanka, particularly in the dry zone where it is cultivated as a minor cash crop, the divul is a large tree that does not demand a second glance. Its fat rough, fissured trunk rises high and branches into a light canopy that tops out about nine metres above ground. If you do not know its secrets, this would be just another tree in the woods. But the divul is more than that - its fruit is the source of delight not only in Sri Lanka but spanning Pakistan to Indonesia, as well as America where it has been welcomed and adopted. Its medicinal properties are fast bringing it international repute.

In Sri Lanka, it is the divul fruit that has claimed hearts. This tennis ball-sized berry has a tough woody pericarp that starts life a greyish white and gradually turns a mottled dark brown as it ripens. This hard shell encases a soft pulp dotted with white seeds; hard, white astringent and sticky when unripe, and brown, soft and sweet when ripe. For cooks, both the unripe and ripe pulp are the primary ingredient for many a delicacy.

The pithy unripe pulp makes a delicious achcharu (pickle) when mixed with sugar, pepper, chillies and salt and spices. Local legend has it that pregnant women often crave for divul achcharu. The dish is also a favourite snack of young people, who enjoy dipping into a bowl of the spicy mixture at home on the weekend or when with friends after a game of cricket. Sweet and slightly sour, the ripe pulp can also be enjoyed on its own, or mixed with sugar, jaggery or honey.

Divul kiri, a thick sweet syrupy smoothie prepared from the dark, soft, ripened pulp, is a favourite drink. The pulp is blended with coconut milk, jaggery (unrefined palm sugar), strained and served with ice. In the past, divul kiri was often served as dessert, along with curd and rice. But times have changed and you are more likely to be served a bowl of divul ice cream topped with the rich brown divul syrup, or dark brown sweet divul jelly for dessert today. And don't be surprised if your breakfast scones come with divul jam, and your fruity shooter contains dark spirited divul nectar.

For the savoury tooth, divul chutney prepared from ripe divul mixed with chillie, salt, cumin and jaggery is delicious with either bread or roti, or as a lunchtime rice puller. Stronger palates may want to spice up their chutney with sliced chillies, curry leaves and coriander. Recent culinary additions include divul-flavoured salad dressings.

Native physicians cite the medicinal benefits of almost every part of the divul tree: from the leaves, to the wood, bark, root, leaves and of course, the fruit. The flesh is highly nutritious, rich with carbohydrates, calcium, Vitamin C, iron, phosphorous and other minerals. Ayurveda posits that it contains antiscorbutic agents that address ailments like scabies, alexipharmic agents that make it an excellent antioxidant, and that it has cardiacal and tonic properties. The unripe fruit is astringent and used to cure digestive disorders, sore throats and gum ailments, while the seeds are used to cure for heart ailments. The powdered shell and pulp is used in a poultice to cure poisonous insect bites. The pulp is also said to contain agents used to cure asthma. Clinical studies on rats have shown it can improve the functioning of the liver and kidneys.

The leaves, which exude a citrusy scent when crushed, are said to have carmative and astringent properties that help inhibit vomiting, hiccups and indigestion. They contain an oil that addresses conditions like itchy skin and insect bites. Studies conducted on extracts of the leaves have shown inhibition of nitric oxide production in the body and gastric ulcers in mice.

The sap from its branches and trunk is said to be an excellent substitute for gum arabic, made from the hardened sap of the acacia tree, to be used in artists' paints, inks and varnishes. In Sri Lanka, a glue made from the sticky substance around the seeds is used in jewellery making.

Medicines prepared from the bark of the tree regulate menstruation. The bark is also used to cure biliousness. The root is used in medicines to cure ear ailments.

Indian rituals sometimes substitute divul for beli (*Aegle marmelos*), a sacred tree also of the family Rutaceae, with a fruit that looks similar in appearance to the divul. However, divul has its own claims to fame: it is featured in Jataka tales and ancient Bengali literature. A popular Jataka story tells of the parrot leader who had lived with his flock on a divul tree. A drought set in and the tree and all other trees began to wither. The good parrot sent his flock away to safer greener pastures, but he stayed behind not wanting to abandon the tree that had given him life since he was born. Sakra, the God of Gods, witnessed the parrot's actions and was pleased. He sent down the rains, saving the parrot and his divul tree. The flock returned and life resumed.

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Intriguing too, is the belief that the fruit is the favourite of elephants who consume them, digest the pulp and excrete the shell undamaged and intact. The possible answer is that the porous shell is hard to digest while its contents being softer are quickly digested. This phenomenon has become symbolic of sacred offerings in this Sanskrit verse: kapitthasya phalam chaiva yathaa kunjara bhakshitam; Tasya saaram cha grihneeyaata tathaa havirasam prabhu. Loosely translated, it means, 'just as the elephant consumes the woodapple along with the shell, but accepts only the core of the fruit, the All-capable Supreme One accepts only the essence of the offerings and leaves the prasadam for others.'

It echoes the very essence of the divul tree, a modestly packaged wealth of goodness.

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