

A Tree and a Flower

Posted on



The Na tree has dense, evergreen foliage.

In February 1986, a tree and a flower were chosen to add to the island's national symbols.

The search for them was guided by many considerations, the main one being that the tree and flower should be endemic or at least indigenous to Sri Lanka. Also taken into account was their distribution, utility value, historical and cultural significance. Beauty, colour and form played its part in the final choice.

The selection panel included a Professor of Botany, eminent environmentalists and the Conservator of Forests. In the selection, species that were the countries strong identifications with them were avoided.

The choice of national tree fell on the handsome, shapely *Mesuaferrea nagassarium* stodigily called ironwood in English, but with a soft and caressing name in Sinhala: Na. Na, which denotes purity, grows to about 30m and is indigenous to the lower wet zone of Sri Lanka. It does not like elevations above 1000m. The Na is a rain forest tree and thrives best in the classically tropical south-west and central foot-hills of Sri Lanka, in abundant rain and bright sunshine. The many place names which begin with the prefix Nagas (Na trees) hint at the widespread habitat of these trees in that region.

One of the most remarkable features of the Na is its beautiful bright red, limp flush of tender leaves which changes into various shades of pink before it finally matures into deep green. In classical Sinhala and Tamil literature, the lips of pretty maidens are always likened to this tender red flush. The na tree has dense evergreen foliage, much branched and of an attractive drooping habit.

The Na tree yields a timber of exceptional hardness and durability and is a popular choice for temple woodwork. Due to its religious and sacred associations it is not

used for secular purposes.

However, in early times the iron-hard, long-life wood was used in the construction of bridges. It is a widely held belief that the Buddha's first visit to Sri Lanka was to a grove of Na trees in Mahiyangane. Mahiyangane, on the banks of the great Mahaweli River, later grew to be one of Sri Lanka's most revered Buddhist shrines. It has a dagaba built in the pre-Christian era which enshrines a hair relic of the Buddha.

Another Buddhist belief identifies the Na as the tree under which the next Buddha (Maitriya) will attain enlightenment. Gautama, the Buddha of the present millennium, reached enlightenment in the shelter of a bo tree (*Ficus religiosa*).

When the southwest monsoon rains are in spate, between May and June, the Na tree is adorned with a profusion of beautiful, large, white, sweet-smelling flowers. The flower petals and stamens are used in herbal medicine. The dried blossoms as well as oil extracted from them are used in the preparation of perfumes, cosmetics and soaps. Na seeds are edible and yield an oil which is used in medicine.

The choice of Sri Lanka's national flower fell on the lovely blue water-lily, *Nymphaea stellata* the nilmanel. This water lily grows in shallow water, and is found in almost all parts of Sri Lanka. The nilmanel flowers throughout the year, its beautiful shapely, azure flower, with layers of petals symmetrically arranged like a star, rising out of the water on a single stem, rooted to the substratum. The flat, round waterproof leaves lay a pretty bright green cover on the water surface on which the lily grows, setting off the petals and golden stamens to perfection.

Considered a symbol of purity and truth, the nilmanel is complemented by a sweet, subtle, fragrance. In folklore the nilmanel is associated with God Vishnu, who is depicted in paintings with a blue-hued skin. For this reason the nilmanel is much used in propitiatory rites of this god and for offerings at Buddhist temples.

In classical literature the eyes of beautiful women were always likened to nilmanel flowers. The heavenly maidens of the famous Sigiriya frescoes hold these flowers in their hands, which enhances and heightens their delicate charm. The seeds and tubers of the nilmanel are edible and are used as a vegetable by villagers, prized for their cooling properties. The tubers also yield a black vegetable dye. The leaves, stems and flowers are used in herbal medicine.

The dried flowers are used to stuff pillows and are reputed to produce happy dreams. •



The Nilmanel water lily is considered a symbol of purity and truth.