

Chill With Rosa: Sri Lanka's PVM drink to cool and keep the body beautiful

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Exotic as well as health giving, PVM drink is great for a tropical thirst

Forget colas. Bring some fizz into your life and stay cool in the sun by knocking back a *pokuru vadha mal* drink - or PVM for short. It is the natural flower flavoured mocktail, which has slaked the thirst buds of generations of Sri Lankans while clearing up the skin and granting overall health benefits to the young and old.

Words and Photographs Manu Gunasena



PVM can be made into a hot cup of tea, or a cool mocktail

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Once the rage of the age, imbibing the cool cordial is now confined in the main to the villages as an urban populace reach for the more convenient bottled and artificial drinks. But in the heart of Sri Lanka's rural areas the flowery shrub grows in many a hamlet's backyard.

But the drink is consumed not only as a thirst quencher. It is also taken for its medicinal properties, known by the ancients and since forgotten by their descendants, who today do not realise the drink's value as a healthy kick start to the day.

Along with its sister the shoe flower, the China rose descends from the species *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*. The shoe flower comes with five petals in various hues ranging from yellow to pink, red or white. The China rose, or *pokuru vadha mal*, blooms with a cluster of petals that give the flower a voluptuous appearance. Coming from the Malvaceae family this species has many varieties. But it is PMV with its red petals growing luxuriantly, and not the shoe flower with its five petals, that takes pride of place in the medicine cabinet.

Mothers give infants a taste of *pokuru vadha mal* to prevent children from developing skin ailments caused by heat

For it is not for any intrinsic sweetness that PMV is drunk. Though it has a tangy taste, to some it may taste too pungent and thus it is often mixed with sugar to make it palatable. It is for the vast reservoir of cooling potential contained within its reddish colouring that it is taken as a tonic and an energy drink.

Mothers give infants a taste of *pokuru vadha mal* to prevent children from developing skin ailments caused by heat. First the flower is cleaned to remove dirt and any small insects that may have snuggled into the flower's bushy petals. Once the undesirables are removed, the flower is washed with water at room temperature. Then it is boiled by placing it in a pan of water. Within a few minutes the water will become a deep pinkish red having absorbed the red colour of the petals.

Once the flower is stripped of its hue, heat treated so to speak, the flower turns white. That is the signal that the flower has served its purpose and transferred its entire goodness to the water. It is then strained and drunk. Sugar and salt can be

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added according to taste and also some lime juice. It can be imbibed as a hot tea or sipped with some ice added as a cool mocktail. Some store it in the fridge to be drunk at convenient times with the goodness in it lasting for a couple of days. But though the goodness may have fled, the taste will linger for much longer.

It is important to note that the optimum time when the flower should be immersed in boiling hot water is when it is still a bud and about to bloom. The more it blooms and the more it is exposed to the sun's rays the more its inherent goodness evaporates.

Ayurvedic research has shown that this liquid greatly helps to control bile - related diseases of the body. It is also considered an elixir to cleanse the body of toxics and thus is used to treat many skin ailments. This is the primary reason why the liquid is given to infants and has been shown to be an effective means of preventing *rakta vata*, or skin rashes caused by internal body heat together with toxicity, to which toddlers are particularly susceptible. Red spots erupt on the skin and can leave scars for a long time. The *vadha mal* formula has been shown to effectively prevent it or, if given after the rash has erupted, to effectively control it and cause it to disappear. In the villages this age-old practice still continues, the antidote to the toxin coming not from some pharmaceutical lab in the form of cream or pills but from a common flower growing in one's back garden.

Oil made out of the petals is rubbed on the heads of babies

For general overall health, the *vadha mal* water is mixed with a special concoction of other ayurvedic medicines as prepared and prescribed by the indigenous medical practitioners in the villages. It is then mixed together and boiled and made into a sweet syrup and the child is fed a teaspoon of it every day.

In traditional Sinhala life, the *vada mal* beverage plays many roles. New born children are bathed with it. Oil made out of the petals is rubbed on the heads of tiny tots. The practice of drinking the water often continues in adulthood and, here again, is considered to be of great help in preventing acne and pimples, and maintaining a clear complexion. The best time to drink it is said to be around 10 o'clock in the morning. At alms giving ceremonies, Buddhist monks are served the *vadha mal* beverage as the welcoming drink known as *gihanpasa*. It is also said to be effective in the treatment of gastritis and stomach ulcers.

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It is also known to promote hair growth and even said to stop greying. Some mix the liquid with spinach and coconut oil and apply it on the head as the herbal treatment for greying hair.

It's an endearing flower that blooms scentless throughout the year. The evergreen shrub grows all over the island. The shrubs grow to a height of approximately 2 metres.

The *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis* has also received recognition as the national flower of Malaysia. Its origins are found in China. The name in technical Sinhalese is *badhu vadha*. In 1987, Korea issued a postage stamp in its honour while Sri Lanka honoured the species when it included the *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis* in a set of four stamps issued in 2012. But while the other may shine with an attractive plumage, it is the red *pokuru vadha mal* that contains medicinal properties and is in demand for more than its beauty.

