

More than just Fluff

Posted on



An abundance of cotton floss bursting forth like luscious fruit

It is a tree for all seasons. Typical to the tropics and subtropics, it is tall, but not so grand in appearance, yet, resilient to the vagaries of nature. The benefits though are manifold. The Kapok tree in Sri Lanka is hardly sought after, except for the very mundane tasks of supporting pepper vines in the home garden and as timber for fencing. This tree has scarcely been the cynosure of the nature enthusiast. All the same, a study of the Kapok tree would make anyone marvel at its worth. It is a big and heavy tree, beneath which is concealed an abundance of fruitfulness.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane **Photographs** Damith Wickramasinghe

The common Sinhala name for the Kapok tree is 'kotta pulun' which translates to mean 'pillow cotton'. In Tamil it is known as 'panchu maram' or cotton tree. The floss of cotton it produces is used in padding pillows, cushions, quilts and as heat insulators. Sometimes even growing up to 100 metres in height, the Kapok tree known botanically as *Ceiba pentandra* is believed to have been brought to Asia and Africa from the Americas. According to M M D J Senaratne, Curator of the Hakgala Botanic Gardens, the Kapok tree is mainly known among locals only for the hundreds of pods it produces with the light floss and its use in padding pillows. Senarathne explained that the Kapok tree is one of the least difficult to cultivate as it does not require regular watering and fertilizer. This may be because Kapok is predominately found in wet and intermediate zones in Sri Lanka. It is a fast growing deciduous tree that sheds its leaves periodically, generally when the pods appear. The tree germinates naturally as the seeds are scattered by the wind.

The Kapok tree is most popular for its prominent pods that are filled with floss and its fibrous seeds. Because it is thin, soft, waterproof and not artificially irrigated, it is considered low on allergens, healthy and comfortable. Sri Lankans still buy the 'pulun' pillows for infants, children and the sick. Ayurveda physicians use its seeds in concoctions made for pain relief, as it is believed to contain an ingredient vital to relieve pain. The bark in the tree trunk is also used as an ingredient in Ayurveda medicines. The oil extracted from

the seeds is used in soaps and as an application to reduce the abrasiveness between metal parts. The cotton floss is considered a weak fibre and hence cannot be spun. Furthermore, its highly flammable quality makes it an inexpensive household fuel. But it is the dried outer-shell of the pod that is commonly used as fuel.

In this day and age when artificial and synthetic products are replacing natural material, the conservation of the 'pulun' tree is not anyone's concern. The tree is not considered commercially valuable in Sri Lanka and hence not grown in plantations. These trees are found distributed at intervals in different parts of the country and therefore harvesting the floss has become a time-consuming, tedious and expensive exercise. The pods are situated quite far above the ground, and given the height of the tree the pods have to be plucked with a strong pole, if not by scaling the tree. The Kapok tree commonly grows in home-gardens and its owners are barely keen to harvest the floss for any use. Hundreds, if not thousands of pods with floss are blown by the wind without being harvested. Separating the fibre from the seeds was also very labour intensive some years back, which has become fast and efficient with machines. The Kapok tree is not considered valuable for its timber and hence felling it for firewood, fencing or to be used in the construction industry has become common these days. Senaratne pointed out that the sheer size of this tree makes it somewhat cumbersome for home-owners to sustain it in their gardens.

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The important character of the cotton floss is that it is untreated and devoid of chemicals and preservatives. It is used in its natural form for padding. Because it is natural, the lifespan is short, quite often Kapok padding will have its solidity only up to about three years. Contrary to popular belief that Kapok cotton floss filled products are going out of use and are meant for the 'ordinary folk', they are still sought by the health conscious.

However sellers state that people still ask for custom-made products such as mattresses made of Kapok cotton floss. In fact pillows, quilts and other products made of Kapok cotton floss costs more than the products padded with synthetic material. Notwithstanding the long process of harvesting the cotton floss and transporting it from different parts of the country to its increasing scarcity, this 'limp fibre' certainly cannot be discounted as a thing of the past.

