The Tree of Candles Blooming from Above

Posted on



Candle Tree also known as the Panama Candle Tree and Candlestick Tree

(Parmentiera cereifera).

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane. Photographs Menaka Aravinda.

In this magical season of Christmas, if only the fruits of the Candle Tree could be lit up, it would be ethereally beautiful, as it glows in the night sky, adding and complementing the glitzy tinsel, the lights, the glass balls, and the candy canes. If this makes anyone wonder whether there's actually a tree that bears candles that produce wax, it certainly isn't one of them. However, this quirky berry can certainly be misleading, given its waxy skin. And add to this complexity the confluence of the yield that sprouts from all over the tree. In some instances, they are so full that they fall from the bark in loads. One can only imagine that they are battling for space and attention. The unusual-looking fruit hanging from the boughs, slim, waxy, yellow-ochre, look precisely like freshly-dipped candles hung out to dry. There isn't much eloquence waxed on this tree of Central American origin in the scientific lingua, which was once endemic to Panama. The Candle Tree has lit its way into neighboring and warm tropical countries, including Sri Lanka. Hence, the Candle Tree is also known as the Panama Candle Tree and the Candlestick Tree (*Parmentiera cereifera*). Growing to a height of seven meters, it's easy to cultivate, with the ability to adapt to various soils. With ample sunlight, its cultivation requirements are sparse. The Candle Tree is not one of those familiar sights, often grown for its ornamental value and rarity, hence found in parks and botanical gardens. The Peradeniya Botanical Garden in Kandy is home to a collection of Candle Trees. The tree is propagated by seeds. The cylindrically fleshy berry begins life as a visually stunning white bell-shaped flower sprouting from the bark.



The flowers bloom into long, yellow candle-like fruits.

The young fruit begins to mature from a shade of green to a green-yellow and finally to a bright yellow, giving it that fancy look of a tree teeming with dangling candles. Such an uncanny torrent can be spellbinding and outright tickling. And in this festive ambiance, such a sight conjures up a beautifully lit tree for the celebration, save for the Candle Tree displays its fantastic nature mainly during the day. The inside of the fruit is sweet. With a texture a bit like sugarcane, it can be chewed for the juice. Because of its juicy nature, the fruit is deemed diuretic. However, much isn’t known about any gourmet spellbinders wrought out of the candle-shaped fruit, although some research suggests preparing the fruit into pickles and preserves.

The aroma of the fibrous flesh, of course, can be tempting, it seems because it smells much like the locally popular Ambarella fruit (June Plum). The bark and root of the Candle Tree are also used for medical purposes, considered helpful for people suffering from colds. It is also listed as endangered by the IUCN. This description of the Candlestick Tree is apt in this festive season, the berries spilling profusely to lighten up the surrounding environment. But the candlestick fruit resembles a modesty farfetched from real life, where candles are imaginative and varied. Imagine festive candles in the shape of angels, bells, stars, and the Christmas tree, with cheerful colors and prints decking the trees? It’s interesting how nature and its bounty grow our imagination that something as ordinary as a candle-shaped fruit can woo us to learn more about it. Just as the candle oozes a softness that conveys its inherent ability to radiate light, the fruits of the Candle Tree shine over in their mysterious beauty.



An unusual sight – similar appearance to a real candle.



The fibrous flesh has a sweet taste.



Candle Trees with a sweet aroma found in Peradeniya Botanical Garden.