The Unsung Hero

Posted on
Assortment of kottamba fruits. The long spindle-shaped kernel is delicious and can be eaten raw and cooked

There’s a lot more to the humble kottamba than meets the eyeWords Daleena Samara **Photographs** Rasika Surasena

To know a tree, all you have to do is learn how to look at it, a poet once said. There is much to see in a kottamba tree, a species often overlooked, even taken for granted, in Sri Lanka, where it is excessive.

From the coastal belts to the dry, wet and intermediate zones, the kottamba (*Terminalia catappa*) or tropical almond proliferates across the island. It is equally at home in Sri Lanka and dozens of other countries across Asia, Africa, Australia and Central America, including India, Thailand, Indo China, Malaysia and Polynesia, the Pacific Islands and the Andamans. The wide reach is unsurprising because dried kottamba fruit float on water, easily crossing oceans. Propagated by seed, it is extremely hardy. Drought, wind and salt tolerant, it effortlessly takes root on

coastlines across the world, becoming a global citizen. It is also an evergreen and does not defoliate in winter. Thus the kottamba tree has become a common feature in many a backyard, roadside and forests around the world.

Kottamba thrives in hot wet climes, usually on low elevations of up to 300m above sea level. Its extreme resourcefulness has often been underplayed, perhaps because it has always had to stand in the shadow of the almond, a species after which it is often named, but to which it is not related. Kottamba's association with almond is merely incidental, because its kernel tastes very much like almond and its oil has similar properties. It became known as the wild almond, the Indian almond, and in fact the almond of many other countries, like Fiji, Malabar and Singapore, which have claimed it as their own.

To know the kottamba tree, you have to look at its every part. Overall, the tree is easy to spot. It rises to a height of up to an average 25m, with long horizontal branches that cluster and spread out at various junctures along the trunk. From a distance, it is quite beautiful, with a layered appearance that has been likened to the tiered pagodas of Indochina. The spreading branches covered with clusters of large leaves, provide welcome shade in the hot tropics. As they mature, the leaves turn from green to yellow to a brilliant pinkish-orange-red. A tree crowned with brilliant red is a glorious sight, which is why kottamba is also considered as an ornamental tree in Brazil.

The kottamba is more than a pretty sight. Multi-functional, it offers up almost every part for use. Sri Lanka's indigenous medical practitioners are well aware of the medicinal properties of kottamba leaves, which are said to be rich with antioxidative and anti-inflammatory properties.

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They are used in indigenous cures for conditions like dermatitis and hepatitis. Elsewhere they are included in a host of folk cures for ailments ranging from sickle cell disorders to eye problems, rheumatism, diabetes, thrush and even contraceptive purposes. For betta fish (Siamese fighters) breeders, kottamba leaves are a blessing. The tree grows naturally in the fishes' habitat, and the falling leaves

are said to condition the water, making it suitable for breeding and providing shade under which the fish build their bubble nests. The leaves also contain substances that harden the scales of the fish, which are prone to fungus infections. The same substance also helps make the fish nests stickier and therefore stronger. So the leaves are often floated in fish tanks or chopped up and packed in ‘tea bags’ to be placed in the tanks. The leaves stain the water, but protect the fish. The leaves are also fed to silkworms and animals.

The flesh of the fruit and the roots contain high concentrations of tannic acid, used to tan leather, and a black dye used to stain cloth and even cars, pavements and sidewalks. Kottamba flowers are small and arranged in dainty clusters along a stem. Its wood is red, hard with a beautiful grain and is used to make crates, carts. Water resistant, it is used in the construction of bridges and water troughs. The Polynesians fashion their canoes out of its trunk.

Like the leaves, the fruit changes colour as it matures, from green to yellow, pinkish red and purple, before drying out into a blackish and then dull brown corky husk. At its heart is a tough seed that hides
a delicious and milky thin spindle-shaped kernel that tastes a lot like the almond nut. A fleshy outer covering is ready for eating when it’s a deep burgundy. Although consuming the red flesh is unheard of in Sri Lanka, it is eaten in some other parts of the world; for example in the Virgin Islands, it is stewed with vanilla and sugar.

To get to the kernel, you have to crack open a surprisingly tough outer casing – Sri Lankans do it by placing the nut lengthwise with edge turning upwards on a hard surface and cracking it open with a heavy object, like a rock or a hammer. The dried fruit are the easiest to crack open because the flesh around the newly-ripe nut is full of red juice that flies out as you hit the nut, staining everything it touches.

It is for the kernel that the kottamba is best loved. It makes a lovely snack, best enjoyed fresh, raw and without any seasoning and it is sometimes curried or shredded into a *mallung,* mixed with coconut, onions, chillies and spices.

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Kottamba can also be cooked. Sri Lankan curry queen Sikhamani Felicia Sorenson recommends that it be stir fried rather than curried. “It’s such a tasty nut, although not readily available, for example, at a supermarket,” she says. She adds that although it is not commonly cooked in Sri Lanka, it lends itself to some very promising preparations.

Felicia gave us two possibilities: Kottamba Thel-dala (Kottamba Stir-fry): Wash and soak fresh kottamba kernels in water for about half an hour. Slice onions, green chillies and ginger. Chop a few cloves of garlic, and add some curry leaves. To prepare, heat a small quantity of vegetable oil, add all the ingredients and stir fry for about two minutes. Add a splash of water. Simmer for about 20 minutes. Finally, add crushed dry chilli flakes and salt to taste. Serve as a side dish in a meal of rice and curry. Felicia adds that kottamba also makes an excellent savoury snack. To make Devilled Kottamba, heat some oil till very hot, add fresh kottamba and fry very quickly. Take it out. Drain, and toss in salt and dry chilli flakes.

If the kottamba was a human, its gifts would have placed it among the wise of the world. Yet no odes, myths or legends have been penned about this resourceful tree. However, a considered look at this unsung hero could lead to a moment of epiphany that transforms it from the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Kottamba: A Tropical Treat

The tropical almond is an unassuming member of nature, that grows abundantly even beside the busy roads. Ven Galaboda Gnanissara Thero, the Chief Incumbent of the Gangaramaya Temple recognised the versatility of this tropical treat and taken steps to reveal its potential…

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara **Photographs** Indika De Silva

Podi Hamuduruwo, the Chief Incumbent of the Gangaramaya Temple has often championed causes that are resourceful and productive to communities. Concepts that materialise to large scale projects to the simplest of ideas are recognised and put in motion in a way that they can impact lives even in the smallest measure. One among these is the inspiration that stemmed from the Thero’s visit to Indonesia. He observed the Kottamba fruit being hailed as a popular treat not second to cashews or any other edible seed.

Upon his return he resolved to inculcate within the communities the potential of a home grown product that could easily yield multiple benefits. First and foremost the trees are found in abundance, and can easily be grown just about anywhere. The trees with large leaves and heavy foliage also enhance the environment providing a cooling shade. Compared to other varieties, Kottamba also has a higher yield of fruit making it a lucrative for cultivating at home or at plantation scale. Seeing that they are easy to grow and maintain the kottamba poses a beneficial alternative to various other varieties of nuts due to its versatile attributes and uses. Even animals who eat the fruit only consume the outer shell sparing the coveted seed inside. Furthermore the seeds contain no cholesterol and are known to possess medicinal properties making it an enjoyable and healthful snack. They can even be prepared in a variety of methods such as curries or incorporated to complement taste such as in desserts and sweets. Much like the cashew nut that is popular among masses the Kottamba is lesser known for its uses and benefits though equal in taste and other attributes.

Noting the obvious advantages, Podi Hamuduruwo took several measures to promote the fruit in the island. To ensure that the fruits of kottamba trees growing in public places are not sent to waste, the Thero took steps to collect fruits from the surroundings. These quantities of fruits are then distributed amongst rural communities to encourage them to cultivate the plant and reap its many benefits. A kilo of kottamba today can be sold at 1,200 rupees per kilo, much cheaper than cashews while still remaining a lucrative option due to its ease of cultivation and high yield. The temple’s estates in Akuressa too grow Kottamba, as a cultivation crop to further promote its uses amongst communities.

Aside from the fruits and the general benefit to the environment, Kottamba trees serve as a good resource of timber. The timber that is moderately heavy can be used for making furniture and for floorings and in general construction.

The tropical almond is indeed an island-friendly fruit tree that is waiting to reach its true potential.