




**Journey through the less traveled roads of Sri Lanka's interior. Find it sheltering rich habitat of wild fruits that are numerous, extravagant in taste, and loaded with health benefits and disease-fighting nutrients.**

**Words** Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

**Photography** Nihal Hewapathirana/Madu Shanka (Vedhagama, Panama).

Sri Lanka's diversely rich landscape is characterized by the taste of more than 100 species of wild fruits that carry a range of sweet and sour flavors, acidic, and pungent. They are good sources of vitamins and minerals. Some are very rare and endemic. The wide variety of wild fruits, such as Palu, Weera, Ceylon Gooseberry (Ketambilla), Bush Plum (Karamba), Lovi, Ceylon Olive (Veralu), Governor's Plum (Uguressa), Hondapara, Himbutu, and Ma-Dan, among many, like the vanishing habitat of our animals, are not common these days. But for a very long time, they had provided the natives with food and childhood pleasures for those who lived a few generations ago. Most importantly, they protected the wild dwellers, sustaining swathes of elephants, sloth bears, civets, and species of



primates, squirrels, and birds. Fortunately, the wildlife reserves  in Sri Lanka and the unspoiled interiors of the island continue to shelter those underutilized wild fruits that animals pamper themselves in. Palu (Manilkara Hexandra) and Weera (Drypetes Sepiaria) are two seasonal wild fruits loved by animals. They are common in the dry arid zone of southeast Sri Lanka. They are found plentifully in the Kumana National Park, where there is an abundance of wildlife. The conspicuous yellow in Palu and the glossy red in Weera are giveaways in the forests and woodlands. They attract the attention of the four and two-legged fruit lovers of the wild.

And along comes the tale of some animals' fondness for rare 'wild' fruits that is legendary. For instance, the sloth bear's love of the Palu fruit is quintessentially fascinating. Come Palu season, the fruit becomes part of its main diet. Out and about looking for its favorite seasonal delight, it's a treat to the eyes watching a bear gobbling the oval-sweet-berry. Its brisk moves from branch to branch along the 30-meter tree are equally fascinating.

The tree starts bearing fruit in May and maturing by July, lasting until September. Given its penchant to intensely tug at trees, the elephant is another top frugivore who enjoys Palu. Sometimes oblivious to an outside company while yanking at the bounty yellow fruits with its trunk.

✘ The Palu fruit of the Ceylon ironwood, borne on the twigs, in-between the leaves, is not an annual occurrence. Hence, there's intense competition among a bevy of wild creatures, such as the sloth bears, elephants, civets, the giant squirrel, and the monkeys, for their share of the picking.

Quite often, fruiting occurs every once in two, three, or four years, so its harvest is desired not only by the animals but also the humans. The tree has a high canopy at the top, and the fruit pulp is likened to the sweetness in grapes.

✘

✘

✘

There is a secret to a genuine tasting of Palu, though. So, anyone who knows the taste of Palu, will tell that real savoring is about tasting the fruit among several fruit-bearing trees. It's good to taste the varying degrees of sweetness in every tree. The fermenting quality in ripe Palu is something to watch out for, lest over-indulgence on the fruit, which is very likely to happen, will make one a little tipsy. Despite the excessive sweetness giving into indulgence, its 'heaty' properties can be a tad sore. Finally, of course, Palu is not without its health benefits. Rich in vitamins, it's used to cure oral diseases. In Ayurveda, the tree bark is used to treat wounds and dysentery.

Filled with antioxidants, Weera is another wild delight of forest animals. Fruiting annually in forests and scrubland, the moderately-large tree grows up to 20 meters. The fruiting season, beginning in April lasting up to September, is a beautiful sight to behold. The orangey-red rounded fruit borne on the branches makes the tree resplendent with beauty as it springs forth from the branches like silky crimson bulbs. However, unlike Palu, the Weera fruit is moderately sweet, slightly astringent, although succulent. Humans have to eat it carefully, lest it leads to a dry throat. Not for the animals, such as the many birds and mammals that search for the fruit, especially the sloth bear who enjoys it heartily. Of course, Weera is best enjoyed when eaten fresh off the tree. Just like Palu. Get a cue from

the animals.

As long as the Palu and Weera trees continue to thrive in our forests, with animals eating them in abundance and helping in the distribution of their seed, there will still be a time left to take a walk in the pathless woods or stop at a rural wayside to savor the pleasure in these wild fruits. You'll undoubtedly feel the onrush of energy and the beauty of Sri Lanka!