

In Brief

Mahua Tree and Its Products

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Mahua is loved by tribal people especially the Santal group. In Jungle Mahal, where Mahua is, the tribal community lives, or commutes especially in the commencement of spring. The reason is only one and that is to collect Mahua flowers. They make local indigenous liquor called Mahua from it. Men and women of the tribal community celebrate their festival by drinking Mahua. Generally, the women of the tribal community collect the Mahua flowers scattered under the Mahua tree. And in the later period, through various processes, the indigenous liquor called Mahua was made.

Mahua (*Madhuca longifolia*; *Madhuca indica*) is a large tree. These grow up to 30 to 40 feet tall. Leaves are oval. Stem short. Its flowers are fleshy, light gray in color, and when the plant is in full bloom, the flowers emit an attractive sweet fragrance. The flowers are succulent, and the taste is sweet and sour. The flower extract is intoxicating. Its fruit is oval. Its mature seeds are available between June and July. Its gray bark is about half an inch thick. Betel-shaped fruits are produced in late spring. It ripens between June and July. It is locally known as Mahula, Madhuka, Moha, Mohul, Mahua etc. Although a dry zone tree, it grows well in humid mild climates. All leaves fall in winter. Flowering starts from the age of 10 years. Mahua tree is found all over the Indian subcontinent including Jungle Mahal. Mahua tree has medicinal properties like boiled leaves of Mahua tree cure cough quickly; applying the seed oil of Mahua tree on the throat cures cold problems; Mahua seed oil is beneficial for arthritis pain if the bark of Mahua tree is washed and

boiled and this decoction is mixed with milk and consumed regularly in the morning and afternoon; it is beneficial in hemorrhoids; old wounds are healed if Mahua leaves are crushed and applied to the wound; Mahua seed oil is also used as an antivenom on insect bites to reduce the venom; Mahua seed oil is beneficial for headaches and if any part of the body is burnt, applying Mahua seed oil will heal the burn quickly.

Mahua flowers are rich in carbohydrates, minerals, vitamins, and calcium. Cooking this flower with rice increases its nutritional value. After sugarcane, mahua flowers are the most important source of wine and vinegar. It is also used as cattle feed. Its flowers and fruits are used as traditional food by tribal people. Its seeds contain 20% to 50% fatty oil, which can be used in soap making. Mahua seed pods can be applied as fertilizer. Many believe that the smoke from burning Mahua seeds can repel snakes and insects. Tribal people use Mahua *Khail* (oil-cake) to kill fish and treat snakebite. Mahua oil is used as a poultice, cure for skin diseases, rheumatism, headache, laxative, hemorrhoids. Gum is obtained from its seeds. Its husk can be used to make activated carbon.

Folklore has it that the bears in the Mahua Forest would go crazy on the scent of the Mahua tree. White milk is secreted from the cut place of the milk tree Mahua, the bark is collected from the trunk and used by traditional religious people to make a reddish-brown *abir* (powder) and use it in festival rituals. Oil is obtained from Mahua seeds. Its wood is very hard. Ground Mahua seed

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meal (Mahua oil-cake) is used as a natural soil amendment for soil borne disease management in other crops as well as in the waterbodies including ponds, lakes, and fisheries. The extract is a favorite drink of the tribals, especially the Santals.

Mahua flowers usually fall under the tree in March. But the people of the tribal community have trouble finding the Mahua flowers that fall in the dry winter grass under the trees. So, to eliminate the dry grass around the Mahua tree, a group of tribal people set fire to the scrub in the forest in the dark of night. Perhaps a brush fire spread from tree to tree in the forest and gradually turned into a terrible, all-consuming conflagration. It becomes impossible even for the fire brigade to put out such an all-consuming fire.

People of the tribal community should be appealed against setting fire by scrubbing the forest floor to clean them. If the tribal people can only be employed on a wage basis to clear the lower part of the Mahua trees, so that they will refrain from setting fire. However, not all places under Mahua trees are filled with grass in the forest areas. In Sonamukhi, Gangajalghati, Beliator, and Jaipur forests of Bankura district, Panagarh, Garh Jungle, Aduria or 14-mile forest, Orgram forest of Paschim Bardhaman district, and Illambazar forest of Birbhum district, grass is not commonly seen under Mahua trees. That is why wild or man-made fires are not heard of in these forests. However, the growth of Dhasna

grass on and above the Susunia hills of Bankura district is quite good which makes it difficult to collect Mahua flowers. Dhasna grass looks a bit like a reed. This grass grows to a height of about 2-3 feet due to which the Mahua flowers that fall from the tree are lost in the thickets of grass. To burn this grass, someone might have set fire to dry scrub on and above the Susunia Hills. Apart from Mahua, there are Palas, Sal, Bot, Aswath, Khejur, Aam, Sonajhuri, Eucalyptus, Arjun, Kasai, Haritaki, Bahera, and Adham Charrha trees in Susunia Hills. And in areas where there are no trees at all, mountain climbing training is provided by the Bankura Nature Academy.

In such a situation, if Mahua trees can be planted around the foothills of Susunia Hills or selectively on 1-3 acres of land surrounding the hills, then the tribals will get their required Mahua flowers during spring. Mahua trees should be planted by the people of the tribal community living near the Susunia Hills, and they have to take care of the Mahua tree. Then they will no longer go up the hill to collect flowers from the Mahua tree. If the Joint Forest Management Committee arranges for the planting of Mahua trees in barren land over a large area on either side of the road leading to Susunia Hills, then it seems that the lion's share of the real problem for torching man-made fire will be solved.
