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Lignum vitae in full bloom

Pix by Selvam Canagaratna

## Crooked and colourful

**L**ignum vitae can be recognized by its crooked trunk and knotty branches. It can reach upto 30 or 40 feet when mature but specimens to be seen around Colombo are much smaller than this. The bark of the trunk is smooth and is shaded in grey and beige. The bark on the branches however is furrowed and ashy in colour.

The leaves are dark green

and shiny. Usually roundish and about an inch long they can vary in shape and size. Each leaf has a spot of orange at its base.

The flowers of this tree make it very attractive during the flowering season which comes twice a year. The first is around May and the second, a much shorter season, is around September. The whole tree is covered at this time in clusters of small flowers in

shades of deep blue, light blue and even silvery white. After the flowering season is over the tree becomes covered in little golden berries which are as attractive as the flowers. They form in clusters of green which then ripen to yellow and orange.

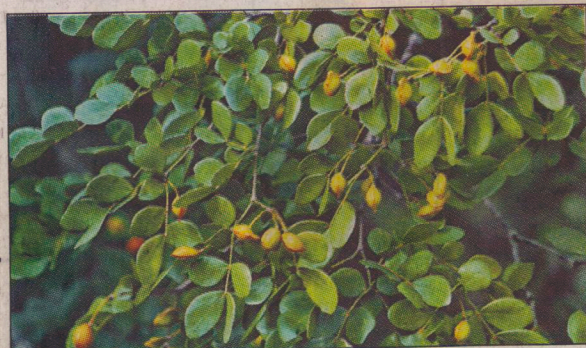
The trunk of the Lignum vitae exudes a translucent green resin wherever there are cuts or sometimes even naturally. This resin can be obtained by cutting the wood and heating it. The resin is aromatic. This tree has many medicinal properties with the wood, gum, bark and fruit all being used in ayurvedic medicine.

The scientific name for Lignum vitae is *Guaicum officinale*. This is derived from the Mexican name for the tree which comes from



a word meaning "recognized in pharmacy and medicine". The timber of this tree is also referred to as Brazil wood. In Sri Lanka, as in India, there appear to be no local names for this tree which originated in South America.

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Golden berries