



## Nakshatra Vanam

### Chithirai - Bengal Quince



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**Botanical Name:** *Aegle marmelos* (L.) Correa

**Tamil Name:** Vilvam

**Sanskrit Name:** Bilva

**English Name:** Bengal quince

### Habitat

Tree to 12 m tall, deciduous; branchlets cylindrical, sometimes slightly angled, glabrous; spines axillary, solitary or paired, straight, stout and sharp. Leaves alternate-3-foliolate, sometimes 5-foliolate, dimorphic; petioles terete to 6 cm long, glabrous or puberulous when young; leaflets sessile, ovate-elliptic or elliptic-lanceolate, oblique at base, shallowly crenate-serrate at margin, tapering at apex, membranous, pellucid-punctate, pale green. Flowers bisexual, greenish white or yellow, fragrant. Stamens numerous in 2 or 3 series, free or basally subconnate, unequal; filaments subulate, glandular; anthers linear-oblong, ca 8 mm long. (India Biodiversity Portal).



### Religious Association

From ancient times, *vilvam* has been a totemic tree for Saivaites. It is always associated with Lord Shiva. It is also called Shiva's tree, tall, stern, austere with dark leaves, and the trifoliate leaf symbolizes the three eyes of Shiva. It is said that offering of water sprinkles with these leaves at any shrine will always remain fresh. The tree has also been associated with the subject of astrology under the constellation *Chithirai*. *Vilvam* tree is the sthala vriksha in many of the Shiva temples in South India.

### Medicinal uses and other benefits

The leaf of the tree is very useful in the treatment of abdominal disorders, vomiting, cut wounds, ulcers, weakness of heart, cholera, dropsy, blood sugar, injuries caused by animals, nervous disorders, cardio tonic, hair tonic, bronchitis, child birth, veterinary medicine for wounds, killing

worms, fodder for sheep, goat and cattle. The bark is used in the treatment of stomach disorders, intermittent fever; heart disorders (Chandra Prakash Kala, 2006).



The bengal quince fruit contains tannin which is useful in the treatment of diarrhoea and cholera. For the treatment of haemorrhoids and vitiligo, the extract of the raw bengal quince fruit can be used. Other ailments like anaemia, ear and eye problems can also be treated. Another treatment for piles is the use of extract of the raw *vilvam* fruit. The flowers can be used as a tonic for epilepsy and tuberculosis (gyanunlimited.com).

### Mythology /Folklore

In the Atharva Veda (c.1000 B.C) it is described as being so sacred that its timber may not be burnt as fuel. Till today, the tree is the totemic deity of the guardians of the eastern Indian forests, the Santhal tribals (Naveen Patnaik, 1993). The fruit is referred to as the “fruit of plenty”. A Puranic legend describes the fruit of Shiva’s tree as the breast of the Goddess of plenty (Koorma purana, II., 18.19). According to the Purana, Mahalakshmi was born as a sacred cow and from her dung arose the *vilvam* tree and thus became sacred. Since the tree is associated with Lakshmi, it is also called Sri Vriksha, the tree of prosperity and good fortune. Another legend says that Goddess Lakshmi was a great devotee of Lord Shiva. In spite of worshipping him for a long time, Lord Shiva did not appear before her. After sometime Lakshmi became the *bilva* tree and Shiva now dwells in the tree (Gupta, 1991).

At Tiruvaikavur, a village folk-tale says that a hunter one day was chased by a tiger. Fleeing from the tiger he climbed the nearest tree which was a *vilvam* tree. The tiger, however, waited patiently at the foot of the tree, knowing that once night fell the hunter overcome by sleep would loosen his grip on the tree and fall to the ground. The hunter also realized this and to keep himself awake, he began to pluck the leaves of the *vilvam* tree one by one and drop them to the ground. When the next day dawned, the tiger, fed-up of waiting, left the tree and went away. The hunter then climbed down without fear. To his astonishment he found a Shiva *lingam* at the foot of the tree. He then realized that the previous night was *Shivarathiri* and he was relieved from the encumbrance of all previous existence. The trifoliate *vilvam* leaf is specially used for the worship of Shiva being consecrated to Shiva with his three functions. The form of the leaf also reminds us of his three eyes. The nut of the fruit is of a large size, assuming a pyramidal or conical shape with a rugged surface. The nut is devoutly worshipped by Shaivites as a *lingam*. (Source – Sacred Trees of Tamil Nadu – 2005 by M. Amirthalingam)



## Conclusion

The tree grows wild in the forests of central and southern India. It is a subtropical species and is distributed all over India. It is also important in Hindu religion and the leaves are used in the worship of Lord Shiva and goddess Parvathi. It also finds mention in ancient scriptures like Vedas and Mahabharata. The fruit contains many useful properties such as carotene, protein, carbohydrate, dietary fibers, fat, magnesium, riboflavin, chromium, water, iron, tartaric acid, calcium, zinc, phosphorous, vitamin A, thiamine, minerals, niacin, potassium, vitamin C and manganese. In spite of the many uses of this tree,



the importance of the tree is realized only during religious functions. Hence, it is very essential to publicize the usefulness of the tree and make every effort to plant this tree (Bengal quince) in all parts of our country. By these measures, it will be possible for the common man to use the products and to worship the deity without incurring any expenditure

