

Devil's Tree

Common names: Devil's Tree, Saptaparni

Scientific name: *Alstonia scholaris*



This tall, evergreen tree is native to the Indian subcontinent and is the subject of many stories and legends. The leaves are usually arranged in patterns of seven – hence the name Saptaparni. The cluster of small, white flowers exude a fragrance that is so strong that it can give people a headache. It is widely believed that the overpowering scent can hypnotise people, and this is one of the reasons behind the name Devil's Tree.

As the leaves are bitter, animals avoid eating them. When goats do eat them the bitter taste is passed on to the milk. As a result it is widely believed that the tree is guarded by the devil and in several parts of the country, people avoid walking past the tree. So great is the fear of the tree that when, some years ago, local authorities decided to plant the tree in Raipur,

there was an outcry because the tree was considered dangerous and unhealthy.

The seeds are held by long fibres and from a distance it seems as if the tree has little streamers hanging from it. The bitter bark is used in the treatment of asthma, heart ailments and fever and is eaten during Diwali to neutralise the consumption of so many sweets.

The wood of the tree was used to make blackboards –and is still used to make pencils – which explains the scholaris in its scientific name.