

Silk Cotton Trees



White Silk Cotton Tree

Common names: White Silk Cotton, Kapok tree, Safed Semal

Scientific name: *Ceiba pentandra*



This is the tree that lines a number of roads in the city and, as summer approaches, dangles with long brown pods that eventually burst to reveal fluffs of cotton. This deciduous tree has horizontal branches and reaches a height of about 20 meters in Mumbai. It has travelled here from South America, where it is often 60 meters tall.

During the winter months the tree remains leafless, but the creamy flowers start to bloom in December or January while the pods begin to appear in March. Around May, the tree turns green with delicate palmate leaves – each with five or seven leaflets. Bats are the main pollinators.

While the cotton from the pods is too short staple to spin into thread, it is considered an excellent stuffing for blankets, pillows and stuffed toys. It was also used to stuff life jackets. The wood is used to make masks, toys and canoes – and it is believed that the word Ceiba comes from the Carib word for a small boat.

Given its distinctive appearance, it's hardly surprising that the White Silk Cotton Tree features in numerous legends. In Trinidad and Tobago, it is believed that the devil resides in an enormous Kapok Tree.

Red Silk Cotton Tree

Common names: Red Silk Cotton, Semal

Scientific name: *Bombax ceiba*



When this tall, erect tree bursts into red flowers in spring it makes for an unforgettable sight.

Unlike the White Silk Cotton, the Semal is considered a native species and is widely planted in South East Asia. During the winter months it loses its leaves, and scarlet flowers appear around February on the leafless tree and attract many birds, which act as pollinators. The fruits appear around May and release micro fibres which can trouble asthmatics. The leaves are palmate with five or seven leaflets.

Extracts from the tree are used in tonics, in Ayurvedic medicines to cure facial pimples and to make red dye.