

# Addicted to Seeds

My husband works for an oil company and I have been lucky enough to follow him on his business trips. Over the years, I have visited 54 different countries and I enjoy discovering new people, new customs, new fauna and above all new flora.

I started gathering sea beans on the beach and pretty seeds from all over the world. When displayed in a large bowl, everybody would admire them and invariably ask, "There are so pretty. What are they?" A good

question, but tricky to answer. There are countless books on flowers, plants and trees, but almost no literature on fruits and seeds.

After a dramatic display of beauty or intrigue to charm its pollinators, its flowers fade and the plant channels its energies into the growth of fruits and seeds. Plants show great creativity in developing chemical compounds, structure, gadgets and highly specialized devices that assure the protection and the dispersal of the seeds.



Monique with her fruit and seed arrangement



*Proboscidea jussieuii*  
(Pedaliaceae)



*Terminalia calamansanai*  
(Combretaceae)



*Adenium obesum*  
(Apocynaceae)



*Barringtonia lanceolata*  
(Lecythidaceae)



*Elaeocarpus angustifolius*  
(Elaeocarpaceae)

## The Traveller's Tree, *Ravenala madagascariensis* (Strelitziaceae)

The gorgeous fan-shaped *Ravenala madagascariensis* is common in tropical gardens, and in Singapore, used as the logo for Raffles Hotel. Unfortunately, it seldom flowers here due to the ever wet conditions, but if you are lucky, one day you may see the huge inflorescence with flowers resembling those of *Strelitzia reginae*, the Bird-of-Paradise, followed by what looks like a bunch of woody bananas.

Each woody 3-lobed capsule splits open into three parts to reveal the black seeds clothed in a thin, glossy and magnificent electric blue tissue. The bright blue aril attracts many birds that eat the seeds. The plant is not usually propagated by seeds but by suckers that develop from the base.

Travellers are said to quench their thirst by drinking the water that collects in the leaf sheaths, but this is not so easy, even if you can reach it, the water leaks everywhere!

The Traveller's Tree is very particular about its orientation and is said to prefer growing in a north-south direction.



*Ravenala madagascariensis* and its inflorescence



Fruits



Fruits split open to show the bright blue aril surrounding the seeds

This is thought to be helpful to travellers and perhaps another reason for the tree's name. To be sure though, take your water with you plus a compass and GPS!



Nature gives us an astonishing diversity of fruits: berries, drupes, legumes, samaras, capsules, nuts, achenes, follicles ...within these 'shrines' the precious seeds are protected and nicely packaged in fibre, cork, paper, jelly, juicy pulp or wax - often attractive to animals that help their dispersal. The fruits and seeds wait at just the right time to pop out before or after a short, long or very long journey. Every day billions of seeds invade the surface of

our planet – in the form of parachutes and shuttlecocks that glide in the air, waterproof vessels or floating rafts that drift on the oceans, exploding mechanisms that propel themselves in the air, and – for the laziest which prefer hitchhiking – hooks or sticky hairs or small harpoons that cling onto animals or even our socks! Yet others are deposited by animals far and wide, after having consumed the tasty pulp around the seeds.

The seeds and fruits come in an endless variety of colours, shapes, sizes, and scents. They can be papery, leathery, woody, bony, winged, ridged, glossy, dull, smooth, rough, spiny, scaly or sticky. They are fascinating, useful and while some are poisonous, others are delicious. Can you imagine a day without rice, wheat, coffee, spices or even worse without chocolate?

## *Trapa* spp. (Trapaceae)

*Trapa* spp. (most commonly called Water Caltrop) are aquatic plants anchored to the bottom of ponds by slender stems feeding a rosette of thick, bright green leaves. The leaves are triangular in shape with a saw-toothed margin and an inflated petiole to make them float. The plant is native to tropical Africa and Eurasia.



*Trapa japonica*, showing (from top in clockwise direction) the rosette leaves, a flower and fruit

*Trapa bicornis*, is available locally and eaten during the Chinese moon festival. The single white starchy seed inside the very hard black shell is toxic if eaten raw but edible once boiled or roasted. Certainly one of the most

bizarre of edible fruits! It seems to be a double-sided, funny-faced creature with a big nose and two horns, looking like a bull, buffalo, goat, bat or even a devil!



Fruits of *Trapa bicornis*

Although sometimes useful, *Trapa* spp. have a dark side and can be a pest due to their invasiveness. The sharp horns can puncture tires, even impale animal's hooves or the sole of your shoe. The four-pointed *Trapa quadrispinosa* is particularly vicious. One of its points is always facing upward, so mind your feet or your tires! A metallic device similar in shape called a caltrop has been used since ancient times to cripple people, horses, or more recently military vehicles.



*Trapa quadrispinosa*

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