Medicinal palms in Rheede’s *Hortus Malabaricus*

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Van Rheede’s *Hortus Malabaricus* is most remembered as the celebrated botanical work on the plant wealth of Malabar. The palms and their medicinal as well as other properties recorded by Rheede are discussed in this paper.

**Keywords:** Hortus Malabaricus, Medicinal palms, Plant wealth of Malabar.

Van Rheede’s *Hortus Malabaricus* published during 1678-1693 in twelve volumes is one of the first books on the natural plant resources of Malabar. This pre-Linnaean monumental work contains 793 illustrations, describing about 690 species of plants in 742 “chapters”. In *Hortus Malabaricus*, the name of the plant in different languages is given followed by a short description starting with habit and ending with medicinal properties. The method of administration of these medicines prevalent at that time in Malabar is also discussed. The information on the plant names and their medicinal uses were provided by the native physicians and Rheede has attached a certificate from these local physicians in *Hortus Malabaricus*1. Four physicians were associated with Van Rheede’s project, Itty Achuden, Ranga Bhatt, Vinayaka Pandit and Apu Bhatt. These physicians provided the plant names and medical uses.

Rheede has described 9 palm species under 7 genera, which is the first botanical work to make a reference to the palms of India. In the first volume, there is an account and figures of four palms, *Caunga*, *Thenga*, *Carimpana*, *Ampana* and *Schunda-pana*. In the third volume *Codda-pana* and *Katou-indel* are described. Rattans come under the ninth volume in which there is an account of *Tsjeru-tsjurel*, *Katu-tsjurel* and *Perimtsjurel*. Medicinal properties for six palms are recorded. Many of the medicinal uses and properties described by Rheede have not found mention in any subsequent work on the medicinal plants of India.

The identity of the palms given in Nicolson et al11 is correct except for the rattans, the *Calamus* spp2. The medicinal
properties and uses of palms as described by Rheede in *Hortus Malabaricus* have been provided below.

**Material and Methods**
A detailed study was conducted on the palms mentioned in Rheede’s *Hortus Malabaricus* based on the Latin descriptions and illustrations provided. The palms were identified and medicinal uses mentioned in the text were compared with the current medicinal uses of these palms from the available literature.

**Results**


This species is cultivated in Kerala, flowers throughout the year and the nuts require 9-10 months to come to maturity.

**Medicinal properties and uses**
The root is boiled in water with dry ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) and drunk in case of fever. The roots are well crushed and decoction made with the coconut oil or kernel of the fruit (‘coco’) is employed in washing the mouth for blisters on the gum.

The juice squeezed out from tender parts and mixed with a few drops of honey is applied to eyes to soothe pain.

The juice of leaves with coconut oil or ‘coco’, given in decoction helps in haemorrhages. Flowers eaten with jaggery help those urinating purulent matter; juice pressed out from flowers and given in cow’s milk is good in gonorrhoea; the cob of the flowers crushed and boiled with oil and smeared is useful in ulcers caused by burning.

The juice expressed from tender fruits helps in blisters of the mouth in infants when washed with it; used in the same way for sore-eyes also.

Rice water drunk with flowers is helpful in soothing burning sensation of liver; the same applied on the head is effective for the redness of eyes.

Chewing of the kernel of the fruit or ‘coco’ is good for blisters of the mouth; coconut oil helps to heal blisters on the head; also useful in haemorrhages; an oil is expressed from the *pongo* which grows from the bark of the tree, and is smeared on the part affected by skin disease caused by worms.


  Cultivated throughout Kerala, but as per C.E.S. Fischer this is growing in Attappadi valley of Malabar in Wild³. Fruits ripens only once during the year.

**Medicinal properties and uses**

  Root boiled in water is useful for sore-mouth, if washed with it, so also for blisters in the mouth.

  The juice expressed from the tender leaves and given with oil *schirgelim* (Gingelly oil) is good in lumbago.


  Rheede has described the distribution, habitat, and flowering behaviour. According to him this tree grows in mountains and stony places in Malabar, chiefly in the provinces of Mangatti, Trichur, Katoor and in many other places. Grows also in the Island of Sri Lanka (Ceylon), in the provinces of Menda Corla, Agras and near Bhoudhow-Malec or Adams peak.

  Flowering takes place at any time of the year, although it is observed often in August. It takes more than fourteen months for the maturation of fruits. The tree produces flowers once in its lifetime after which it dies and from such fallen fruit a new tree sprouts.

**Medicinal properties and uses**

  When compared to other palms this tree has hardly any use in medicine; nevertheless, the juice expressed from fruit bearing shoots is effective in inducing vomiting in persons rendered delirious and giddy by snake-bite. If the tender sheath of this is cut, a liquid trickles down, which gets condensed into a harder substance under sun’s rays. It is believed that when this is given to a pregnant woman, the foetus is killed and is forcefully expelled.

**Other uses**

  Bracelets and necklaces are made from the fruit globules. These being light and painted with red colour could easily be
Codda pana (*Corypha umbraculifera* L.)

Katou indel – *Phoenix sylvestris* (Linn.) Roxb.
mistaken for genuine red corals by the unskilled.


Rheede reports that this tree grows in mountains and rocky places and in sandy soil everywhere in Malabar, chiefly around Verapoli and Travancore. It flowers and bears fruits at any time of the year, and is not fertile till the sixth year.

**Medicinal properties and uses**

The leaves, fruits and other parts of the tree are very contracting and stop diarrhoea.

**Other uses**

Fruits of this tree are used as masticatory by the poor just like the fruits of *Areca*, with betel leaf and lime. They are also greedily sought after by the elephants because of the “Palmito”, the very sweet marrow enclosed in the branchlets to which the fruits adhere. The natives make felts or caps from the leaves.


![Tsjeru-tsjurel](image)
Medicinal properties and uses
The juice of the roasted root is smeared on the head against acute headache.

Other uses
Fruits are edible. Natives make woven trellis-like seats from this reed, which is split into filaments.


Medicinal properties and uses
According to Rheede the dried and pulverized kernel of the fruit heals ulcers of knee.


Perim tsjurel (*Calamus thwaitesii* Becc. & Hook.f.)


This is the thickest cane available in Western Ghats; it occurs in Palakkad, Malappuram, Kannur and Kozhikkode forest areas. It flowers during June-July, and fruiting in April-May.

**Medicinal properties and uses**

No medicinal property has been reported for this species in *Hortus Malabaricus*.

**Other uses**

The fruits are reported to be edible.

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**References**

