

SOME SIAMESE SUPERSTITIONS
ABOUT TREES AND PLANTS

by

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It is not advisable to plant certain kinds of trees and plants near the house or in the compound. They are unlucky.

1. Tau Rang เตารัง (*Caryota mitis-palmae*). This is a type of palm tree which bears fruit-like berries in beautiful clusters but with poisonous fruit walls. The tree may be found in the compound of a European house as an ornamental tree. The Thai people do not grow it for the reason that the second syllable or word of "tau rang" is similar in sound to another word which means deserted or abandoned, (perhaps the poison of its fruit and also its non-economical nature has something to do with its taboo).

2. Sala and Rakam สะลาและระกำ (*Zalacca wallichiana-palmae*). These two kinds of trees are very similar. They are rattan-like palms with sharp spines in whorls around the stem. Sala in Thai means forsaken and Rakam means affliction. Hence they are not grown in a house compound. Owing to their edible sour fruits which in some varieties have a sweet flavor and are of high marketable value. Gardeners grow them as hedges, for their sharp spines will prevent trespassers.

3. Soak โสภ (*Saraka indica*). Soak in Thai means anguish or sorrow. A bad name for a tree to have growing near the house. Perhaps the tree is the Indian asoka which bears red clusters of flowers with a mild fragrant odor. In India the tree is supposed to flower when struck by the foot of a beautiful damsel. Asoka in Sanskrit means sorrowless, but this word in Thai has lost its first unaccented syllable and becomes soak or sok which means quite the opposite of sorrowless.

4. Lanthom ลันทม. This is the frangipani or the temple or pagoda flower tree. The word lanthom has a sound resembling the word rathom which means agony. Hence the taboo. It is usually to be found in a wat or monastery where, according to a superstitious belief, any unlucky or ill thing will lose its bad effects.

5. Kradanga กระดังงา (*Canagium odoratum*). A tall tree bearing sweet-smelling flowers. It is usually not found near a house due to the fact that the tree has soft wood, and its branches are easily cracked and broken.

6. Champi and Champa จำปีและจำปา (*Michelia champaka*). These are two varieties of a tree which bears in the former a scented creamy white flower, and in the latter yellowish ones which are in great demand for floral decorations. Both kinds of trees have soft wood and are liable to be broken easily, hence, they are not grown near a house.

7. Rak รัศมี (*Calotropis gigantea*). This tree is the araka of India. Its flowers are strung into garlands to be worn around the necks of criminals on their way to the place of execution. In Thailand the rak tree grows wild in deserted dry places. Its trunk and branches have a milky sap and its flowers are used for floral pieces which are to be seen usually at cremations. Now it is the fashion for a bride and bridegroom to wear a garland of these flowers, for the name rak means love in Thai.

8. Chaba ชบา (*Hibiscus rosa sinensis*-Nalvaceae). This is a shrub plant which is raised by the Chinese and bears scarlet-red flower. There are many varieties of this shrub with various beautiful colors. In the old days an adulteress was punished by being exposed to the public on a kind of stilt with red chaba flowers tucked above her ears. A convict to be executed for heinous crimes was also decorated with such a flower behind the ear on his way to the place of execution. In southern India, a garland of such flowers is hung around the neck of a criminal to be executed.

9. Nang Yaem นางแย้ม (Clerodendron fragans). A shrub having fragrant flowers. It is easily propagated as its roots run far and wide underground and shoot up as new plants until they become a nuisance. The people believe that Nang Yaem will turn into a "phi" when it grows old, and disturb the peace of the house by pelting stones at it. Nang Yaem in Thai means to open slightly in bloom or the peeping of a damsel, hence its poetic name is found quoted in Thai erotic literature.

10. Saraphi สารภี (Ochrocarpus siamensis). A tree which bears sweet-scented flowers.

11. Phikun พิкул (Mimusops elengi). A tree which bears small star-shaped flowers which retain their sweet scent for a comparatively long time. On certain important occasions such as a coronation, Phikun flowers of gold and silver are distributed by the King to officials.

12. Chan จันทร์ (Diospyros packmanii-C. B. Clarke). A tall tree which bears yellow fruit. When ripe the shape of the fruit resembles the moon. Hence its name.

The above trees No. 10, 11 and 12 are not usually grown in the house compound, but curiously are to be found in wats and the royal palace compounds. If a person dares to plant such trees in his residential compound, misfortune will occur sooner or later to the owner.

13. Malakaw มะละกอ (Carica papaya-cucurabitaceae). The papaya tree with edible fruit, has no bark and is liable to uproot easily, hence, it is not advisable to grow in the house compound or near the house. Unripe fruit of the papaya is used as food, but ripe fruit in the old days was not usually eaten because of its strong butter-like smell which Thai of older generations disliked. Recently a number of varieties of this tree have been introduced into the country with improved fruit which suit the taste of the younger generation. The papaya tree is to be found in the compounds of houses, but older people cling to super-

stitious beliefs, and give well-meaning advice that it is not good to have such trees in the garden.

14. Phutaraksa พุทราक्षा (Canna Sp.). In Thai, this means "Buddha's protection". It is cultivated in a house compound for its beautiful showy flowers. Some people object to the growing of this plant near the house. It is believed the name Buddha has a great deal to do with the superstition, for anything sacred or in connection with "phi" is not allowed to be in the same compound as an inhabited house.

15. Po โพ (Ficus religiosa). The religious fig tree under which the Lord Buddha was sitting when he received his enlightenment. It is to be found in most of the wats. Hence, when a person sees from afar a po tree, he knows that a wat is there. Such a sacred tree is not grown in the compound of the house. The po tree in the wat is usually a tall shady tree around which the people sometimes wrap a yellow robe in the same manner as robing a Buddha image with the yellow robe. Some people place bamboo poles, trimmed and whitewashed, as supports to the holy tree. In the old days cowrie shells used as token money, were inserted inside the bamboo poles. Poor people will bury the bones and ashes of their dear ones near the root of the po tree so that they may be near the holy symbol of the Lord Buddha.

16. Nun หนู (Ceibopentendra) or kapok tree is not grown near a house.

17. Ngiew งิ้ว (Bombax malabaricum-Malvaceae). It is unlucky to grow the red silk cotton tree in the house compound.

These two types of trees have soft wood of no economic value. In former days big ngiew trees were utilized as coffins for the soft wood could be dug out easily for the purpose.

18. Takian ตะเคียน (Hopea odorata) and -

19. Yang ยาง (Dipterocarpus alatus). These are tall forest trees. They are of course not fit to be grown in a limited house ground. Besides, such big trees are believed by the people to be

abodes of tree spirits. There are two kinds of spirits that reside in the trees. One kind is a male spirit half "phi" half *thevada* or god, and the other is a female spirit like the wood nymph. The former, as surmised from the tree cult usually resides in a big tall tree, the wood of which has no economic value, while the latter resides in a tree which supplies economic wood or fruits. Even today people in outlying districts will not dare to cut down any big tree for fear of the tree spirit residing in it. Even in falling a tree of smaller size, the people will first make an offering to the spirit to atone for the offence made. A very big and very tall tree of the kind which the people believe to be the abode of the spirit will not be felled at any cost. In the old days when certain big trees were required for the making of the traditional royal barge or posts for the tall roof of a royal pyre, an offering was made and a royal proclamation was read to the spirit under the tree before it could be cut down. This was a wise practice to preserve big trees of the forest from wanton felling by the simple folk.

The Takian tree in particular is a very well known one where a female spirit has her habitation. She is known as "Nang Takian" or Lady Takian. In the imagination of the people, Lady Takian usually takes the form of a beautiful maiden who sometimes makes a wailing and piercing sound when the tree, her abode, is felled. Unforseen and mysterious calamities will befall the person or persons who destroy her abode. A Takian tree growing near the bank of a river with its roots protruding above ground is to be avoided, for the Lady Takian of that tree is a fierce one. Whoever relieves himself near the base of her tree will suffer from ulcers. To add to the belief, both kinds of trees, Takian and Yang are usually found in a wat where all sorts of ghost stories emanate.

20. Phutsa พุทสะ (Zizyphus jujuba). The Indian Jujube bears edible cherrylike fruit. It grows wild and its thorny branches are used to block the passage of evil spirits when there is a birth. The flowers have a strange nauseous smell. This

tree is not grown near the house, perhaps, apart from the smell of its flowers when in bloom, the last syllable "sa" of Phutsa" also means in Thai to diminish or to grow less. It is unlucky to have it in the compound of the house for one's fortune in trade will grow less and less.

21. Mayom มะยม (Phyllanthus distichus-euphobiaceaea). The star gooseberry which bears acid fruit. Its branches are used by monks who dip it in the consecrated water and sprinkle it on persons or places as a sort of ritual purification. Some people do not grow this tree near the house. The Lord of "phi" is called in Thai, "Phya Yom" from Yama the Indian God of Death. Perhaps because the name of the tree "mayom" sounds like Phya Yom in its last syllable, it is not grown near the house of some people. The branch of mayom tree which is used for the purification ritual is no doubt used in imitation of Yama, the Indian God of Death who holds a staff (Yama Dandha) with which he beats the evil spirits. On seeing such a staff the evil spirits will flee.

22. Marum มะยม (Moringa, oleifera-Maringaceae). The Indian drum stick tree which bears pods like drum sticks. Some people object to have such a tree grown in the house compound. No doubt the objection is due to the name of tree "marum" which coincides with the Thai word ma-rum which means "to come in a crowd". This may be taken to mean to come in a crowd in order to consume food or to come in a crowd to attack.

23. Kluey Tani กล้วยตานี. A variety of banana which bears fruits. Though delicious to taste when ripe, it is not usually eaten on account of its numerous seeds. They are cultivated in gardens for their leaves which have the highest quality for wrapping purposes, or to make into leaf cups. They are in great demand in the market. Kluey Tani is not grown near the house for it has an evil repute that it has a female "phi" named Nang Tani who every now and then scares people. It is a belief that by certain magical art the *Nang Tani* may be induced as an ally in love affairs. Here is one of the arts. You go to such a banana

tree which is about to bear a bud and flirt with the Nang Tani-imaginary of course. Repeat this many times in the following days until you are sure in your imagination that she consents to love you. Then cut a small piece of the root and carve it into a figure of a woman. While doing so recite a certain mantra or magic spell. Store it carefully in a small receptacle. During the night the *Nang Tani* will appear to you in a dream as your wife. If you love any girl you can invoke her to the successful end of the affair. Like a human wife the *Nang Tani* will resent this and do you harm if you marry a girl without her permission or consent.

