



Lignum Vitae

(*Guaiacum officinale*)

Lignum Vitae is a member of the same family (Zygophyllaceae) as the Jamaican Buttercup and like the Jamaica Buttercup it is restricted to the southern coast of Jamaica. The species occurs in other parts of the West Indies and northern South America. The flower of the Lignum Vitae is the National flower of Jamaica.

The tree is about 5-6 m. tall but will get as high as 9 m. The branches spread out to give it a rounded appearance. The trunk is greyish and thick in proportion to the height. The leaves are round and glossy and the plant often it is covered by clusters of bright blue (or white) flowers, orange fruits or both flowers and fruit together.

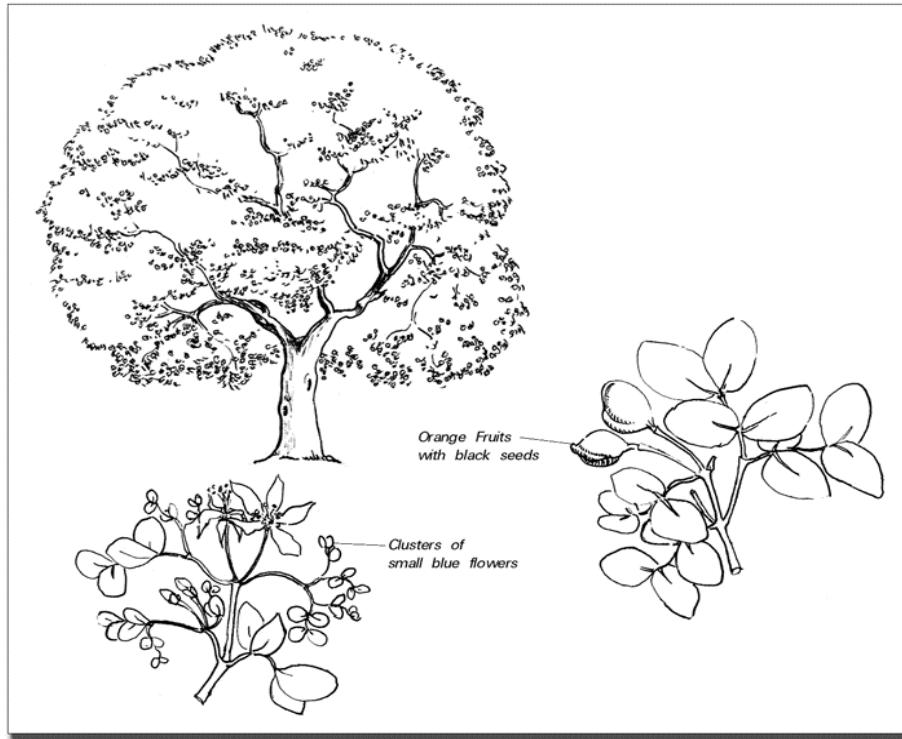
The tree is very slow growing. The wood is the heaviest of all woods and will sink in water, this denseness makes it valuable for certain purposes. In the past most ships used it for propeller shaft bearings and it is now used for such items as batons for policemen, auctioneer' hammers, speaker's gavels, mallets, craft works and carvings.

In the 1770's the gum from this tree was of very high economic value. The gum was obtained by jagging the tree and collecting the exudation ("tears") when it hardened. At that time, it was sold in Jamaica for two shillings and sixpence per pound. The fruit, bark and flowers were used to make laxatives and the foliage was frequently used to scour and whiten floors. In Jamaica the resin is sometimes soaked in rum as a gargle for sore throat, as a drink for "tummy ache" and as an application to cuts or rubbed on affected parts in the case of rheumatism.

The caterpillar of one species of butterfly called *Kricogonia* uses the leaves as food. This moderate-size pale yellow butterfly is often seen hovering about Lignum Vitae trees, usually during the Months of May to July. In 1997 there was a severe drought up to September and in October after heavy showers of rain they were abundant for a few weeks.

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Family: Zygophyllaceae	Species: <i>Suaiacum officinale</i>	Author: Linnaeus
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Height: 6m	Habitat: Sea level to 250m	Persistence: Evergreen
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