

Plant of the Month

March
2024

Common Name: Wonderful Calabash Tree

Scientific Name: *Crescentia mirabilis*

Family: Bignoniaceae

Etymology

Genus: *Crescentia* – named for Pietro Crescenzi a 14th century author

Species epithet: *mirabilis* – latin for amazing or wondrous

Distribution

Endemic to Cuba.

Native Habitat

Wet coastal region of the north coast of Cuba.

Description

Small often highly branched evergreen tree to 5m. Leaves are verticillate (whorled) and whilst most appear to be ovate in shape this may vary as does the length of the leaf (5-10cm).

Flowers

A typical inflorescence holds 1 or 2 pale green trumpet like flowers which flare out from the trunk (cauliflory) and or branches (ramiflory) and therefore are cleverly camouflaged within the canopy. The flowers do not stay open for long and are said to be pollinated by night flying insects and other fauna.

Fruit

Fruits are large and spherical about the size of a grapefruit. They are gourd-like and known as calabash. The hard, woody thin shell holds a white slimy and astringent inner pulp that surrounds small dark flat seeds. Neither are edible.

Location in Garden

Lower Garden bed 97 near the Mare and Foal statue.

Information

Crescentia is a genus of six species of flowering plants in the family Bignoniaceae. Of the five species found in the Caribbean, four are present in Cuba and Dominican Republic. *Crescentia mirabilis* is one of the species endemic to Cuba and classified as an endangered species. It was first collected in 1922 by Erik Leonard Ekman (1883-1931), a Swedish botanist during what was proposed as a short stopover visit to Cuba for one month on his way to Brazil. The visit actually lasted 7 years !

The Calabash produce large, more or less spherical fruits that can vary in shape and size. Due to the impenetrable nature of the shell, seed dispersal is very dependent on animal or human assistance. In nature the fruit is eaten (or stamped on then the pulp is eaten) by horses or animals of similar weight and strength. Failing this people can saw through the shell and release the seeds for propagation.

Shells of the Calabash can be used as containers, water carriers and musical instruments but the pulp is toxic and should not be ingested.

