

FEATURES

Poui wood strong, fire resistant

BY FEROZE OMARDEEN

WHY is the poui blooming now? I found the reason in *Native Trees of Trinidad and Tobago* published by the Field Naturalists' Club. According to the book, the yellow poui "flowers in the dry season, usually from March to May, but we have seen it flower in July. Flowering seems to be triggered by rain showers after a period of drought?"

In temperate zone trees, flowering is mostly controlled by the length of the days, and thus the time of the year. However, in a tropical climate like ours, other factors may dominate, and the most important may be water availability. A delayed flowering period, as we are seeing with the yellow poui, can occur as a result of a period of severe water stress followed by sudden rainfall. And 2015 certainly gave us a severe dry season. Interestingly, the poui on the northern side of the Aripo ridge in Brasso Seco are not flowering. These have presumably not been so water-stressed, as they live in the wettest part of TT.

Although in TT we don't think of it as a commercial timber tree, this species is at risk elsewhere because of the characteristics of its wood. The wood is heavy, hard, durable and resistant to insect attack. The wood's strength has not gone unnoticed locally and it has found its way into the traditional gayelles where it is prized by stick-fighters for their bois.

Yellow poui wood is not just strong. It is also fire resistant. Amazingly it has a fire rating of A1 which places it in the same league as concrete and steel! Thanks to these characteristics, poui wood is prized in construction, especially for exterior decking. Due to its fire resistance, yellow poui can be relatively common in those areas of Trinidad which are subject to yearly bush fires (the hillsides around Mount St Benedict for example).



HUMMINGBIRDS visit the poui

With restrictions in place on the export of threatened hardwood species, like mahogany, *Tabebuia* wood is now said to be one of the top timber exports from Brazil. It many parts of its range it is found growing as a large and strong forest tree, growing up to 150 feet tall. According to some studies, for every one target yellow poui tree, loggers will have to destroy up to 28 other trees from pristine old growth Brazilian forests. For this reason, some organisations are calling for a boycott of the exported wood.

The tree has also been recognised in parts of its range for its medicinal attributes. The bark is reported to contain over 20 active compounds including lapachol, quercetin and other flavonoids and is used by some for the treatment of certain infections, inflammatory diseases, peptic ulcers, blood coagulation and immune system problems.

But back in TT, we love the yellow poui for the beauty of its annual flower show, a special feature of life



on these islands that none of us forget, wherever we roam. Hummingbirds and bats like the brilliant flowers too (for their nectar). The winged seeds are dispersed widely by the wind, so there is no tasty fruit produced for fruit eating animals to feed on.

Tree lovers will also know its close relative in the same genus, the pink poui (or apamate), a popular wood for making furniture. This is not a native species, but grows wild on nearby mainland areas in Venezuela. In Tobago there is the Antillean species called the white trumpet tree

with a similar but white "poui" flower. We do have two other local *Tabebuia* species, including the mysterious black poui, which is uncommon and difficult to tell apart from the similar yellow poui.

People often ask, "how can I learn to identify trees, it's so confusing..." Well, the book by Quesnel, Farrell and Comeau is meant to give us a start. These three members of the Field Naturalists' Club have now sadly all passed away, but in that little book they have left their legacy, a starting point from which we all may begin to learn about and to share their wonder and love for our amazing trees.

For more info on our natural environment contact the TT Field Naturalists' Club at admin@ttfnc.org, our website at www.ttfnc.org, Facebook and YouTube pages. The club's next monthly meeting and lecture will be on July 9 at St Mary's College, Port-of-Spain.



Note: Picture inserted by the newspaper. Not a poui but a vine known locally as cats claw

HANGING poui in the mountains of the Northern Range.



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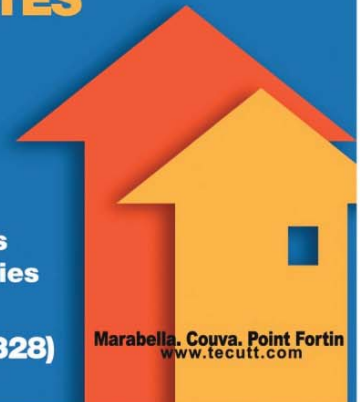
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