



**Green Culture Singapore Feature Article for July 2008**

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**Above:** *Melastoma malabathricum*, commonly known as the Singapore Rhododendron, is a beautiful flowering shrub that is almost never found growing in home gardens.

*Melastoma malabathricum*, commonly known as the Singapore Rhododendron, is a flowering shrub that can be found growing locally in wastelands. As a result, it is not surprising to know that most Singaporeans regarded it as a weed and this plant is seldom considered as a candidate for planting a home garden. The Singapore Rhododendron belongs to the Melastoma family, Melastomaceae. It is alternatively known by its Malay name, Senduduk.

Although the name “Singapore Rhododendron” may make *M. malabathricum* sound as if it can only be found here, the plant, in fact, has a wide distribution around this part of the world. It has been reported to be found growing wild in the Indian Ocean Islands, throughout South and South-East Asia, China, Taiwan, Australia and the South Pacific Ocean.

For those who have seen *M. malabathricum* before, they would have noticed that it is a showy plant that seems to be perpetually in flower, even under challenging environmental conditions encountered in wasteland, where the sun is glaring and nutrients and water are lacking. It deserves more attention and can be a potential fuss-free flowering ornamental plant to grow in the garden.



**Above:** The white flower form of *M. malabathricum*.

A shrub that usually grows to about 1 m, the reddish stems and leaves of *M. malabathricum* are rough to the touch as they are covered with fine bristles. Each leaf is long and narrow and pointed at both ends. It has 3 distinct ribs and the fine bristles can be found only along on the ribs located on the leaf's underside.

The attractive flowers produced by *M. malabathricum*, measuring up to 7 cm in diameter, are produced in a cluster at the tip of each shoot. Each flower has five petals and the most common flower colour is deep mauve. Occurring less commonly is the white flowered cultivar that is known as *M. malabathricum* 'Alba'.

The flowers are interesting as they have two types of stamens – the anthers of five outer stamens, arranged in an outer ring are larger, curved and violet in colour while the remaining five located in an inner ring are straight and yellow in colour.

Fruits of *M. malabathricum* are technically classified as berries and when they are ripe, they break open irregularly to reveal the soft, dark purple, sweet but rather astringent-tasting pulp and numerous orange seeds. The seeds are tasteless and can be eaten and they stain the tongue black. The name “melastoma” is Greek for "black mouth", a name appreciated by generations of children who have eaten the berries.



The fruits of *M. malabathricum* 'Alba' (**left**) have a green coloured rind while those found on plants that produce mauve coloured flowers (**right**) are reddish brown.

*Melastoma malabathricum* has medicinal properties particularly the white flowered form and is a pretty candidate to grow in a tropical medicinal garden. It is a well-known herb where its leaves, shoots and roots are prepared in various ways and used to treat stomachache and diarrhoea. The roots and leaves of the *M. malabathricum* are applied to lesions and wounds to help with the healing process and also in the treatment of haemorrhoids.

This beautiful, medicinal shrub may sometimes be confused with the Rose Myrtle (*Rhodomyrtus tomentosa*), which is another medicinal plant. Both shrubs have leaves that have three prominent ribs and are rough to feel. They can be easily distinguished easily as the leaves of the Rose Myrtle end with a blunt tip whereas those of *M. malabathricum* are pointed.



**Above:** Flowers of the Rose Myrtle.  
**Right:** Flowers of *M. malabathricum*.



To add to the confusion, the fruits of both shrubs have a ring of persistent calyx lobes. The fruits of the Rose Myrtle are larger and when they are ripe, the fruits turn greyish purple in colour. On the other hand, the fruits of *M. malabathricum* are usually smaller in size and when they are ripe, the fruit's rind is reddish brown or green in colour.



**Above:** Fruit of the Rose Myrtle.  
**Right:** Fruits of *M. malabathricum*.



The flowers of *M. malabathricum* are also larger than those of the Rose Myrtle and can be told apart from the latter's via the appearance of the anthers. *Melastoma malabathricum* has ten distinct anthers whereas those of the Rose Myrtle are far more numerous and fine. Only the flowers of the Rose Myrtle change colour with age – they are pink when freshly open and fade to almost white.



**Above:** Leaf of the Rose Myrtle.  
**Right:** Foliage of *M. malabathricum*.



A flowering shrub that should be grown in any eco-garden, *M. malabathricum* is a plant that attracts many birds including the yellow vented bul bul, flowerpeckers, doves and pigeons which consume the ripe fruits and help to disperse its seeds. Squirrels and monkeys are also fond of the fruits. The plant is the host for caterpillars of butterflies such as the Common Sailor (*Neptis hylas*) and the Grey Count (*Tanaecia leptidea*).

Although the plant has earned itself a “weed” status, in addition to its use in sustaining wild life, it has an important contribution to the wasteland it colonises because it helps to prevent soil erosion. Research has shown that *M. malabathricum* is a plant that is very efficient in absorbing aluminium ions from the ground where it is grown. Hence it has the potential to be used to remove aluminium from soils that have been contaminated with the metal.



**Left:** When the fruits of *M. malabathricum* are ripe, they split open irregularly to reveal the soft, dark purple, sweet but rather astringent-tasting pulp and numerous orange seeds.

## Culture

For garden use, *M. malabathricum* is a full sun plant, judging from its growing habit, i.e. open wasteland. In order for the plant to grow healthily and flower profusely, the shrub needs to be planted in a location where it can receive direct sunshine.

This flowering shrub is not fussy about soil type and *M. malabathricum* can also be grown in areas with clayey soil but it definitely does better in soil that is fertile and friable. It should be noted that its roots should be consistently moist and plants should not be allowed to dry out between watering. It is a suitable candidate as a marginal plant for bogs and water gardens.

Plants should be pruned back to shape them and because of its self-seeding habit, shrubs in bloom should have their spent flowers removed promptly, that is, dead-heading, is required to limit fruit and subsequent seed production.

Although it is a plant that is adapted to nutrient-poor conditions, *M. malabathricum* would definitely benefit from a regular dose of a general fertilizer to promote healthy growth and produce a profusion of flowers.

Plants can be easily propagated from seeds if they are taken from fresh, mature fruits. Alternatively, a faster way to get new plants is to grow them from stem-cuttings.

*Melastoma malabathricum* is seldom bothered by pests and diseases. Being a host plant for certain caterpillars, do expect some damage to the plant's foliage when it is the season where butterflies start to lay their eggs.

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## References

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