

Lotus – the sacred flower

By Salvatore Battaglia



The lotus flower fragrance perfectly reflects its botanical form. The medium is the message. The flower rises pristine from the earth's mud and offers a fragrance of heavenly bliss.¹

Lotus is truly unique. All parts of the plant – the roots, stems, leaves, seeds and flowers have been used for millennia as a food source and in traditional medicines. The lotus is revered in many cultures as a symbol of purity and perfection. It is not surprising that it is embedded in our psyche as a sacred plant symbolising divinity.

Botanical name

Nelumbo nucifera

Synonyms

Sacred lotus, Indian lotus, Chinese waterlily

Family

Nymphaeaceae

Botany and Origins

Worldwide there are only two species of *Nelumbo*: *N. lutea* and *N. nucifera*. *N. nucifera*, also known as the Indian or sacred lotus found throughout Asia and Australia. Whereas *N. lutea*, the American lotus, occurs in eastern and southern North America. *N. lutea* is considered to be a subspecies of *N. nucifera*. In India *N. nucifera* is commonly known as lotus, kamala or padma. There are two varieties of kamala; one has white flowers and is commonly called *pundarika* or sveta

kamala; the other has pink or reddish-pink flowers and is called *rakta kamala*. The whole plant with flowers is known as padmini.²

Lotus is a large and rhizomatous aquatic plant which is native to India, but was spread through Persia, Egypt, and Asia in ancient times. It was introduced to Europe as a water-lily in the 18th century. Lotus plants are commonly cultivated in Australia, China, India, Iran, and Japan.³

The sacred lotus has long been considered a close relative to water lilies. However, the lotus flowers are significantly different from those of water lilies. In the wild, the sacred lotus grows in warm to tropical regions of Asia (Iran to China, Japan, and New Guinea) and northeast Australia.⁴

The lotus seeds, which are botanically nutlets of multiple fruit, have a very hard air and water-impervious pericarp. The seeds are claimed to live for centuries. The oldest germinating seed was determined to be approximately 1,288 ± 271 years.⁵

Pink lotus, *Nelumbo nucifera*, is considered one of nature's most ancient aromatic botanicals, dating back 135 million years.¹

Method of extraction

Lotus absolute is produced by solvent extraction from flowers of *Nelumbo nucifera* plants that are hand-picked from 'managed' ponds. It is a renewable resource and is harvested all year around, however, the highest production is from February to April.¹

Characteristics

The pink lotus flower is often referred to as the most heavenly scented of all the lotus flowers. It has a honey-sweet, rich, floral and earthy aroma; a spicy, penetrating, green, earthy top note and a tenacious, deep, earthy dryout.¹

Rhind describes the aroma of pink lotus absolute as rich, sweet, aromatic floral. It also has fruity, herbaceous, leathery, powdery, spicy, muddy and medicated notes. She describes the scent of white lotus absolute as rich, sweet and floral with a slightly more animalic and herbaceous dryout.⁶

Chemistry

The chemistry of pink lotus absolute is complex. Typical constituents include caryophyllene oxide, β-caryophyllene and cis-jasmone. The slightly medicinal note is due to 1,4-dimethoxybenzene.⁶

Mythology

The lotus flower is an object of immemorial significance and revered in many cultures. It is a symbol of beauty and absolute purity. It represents the divine status of deities.

The lotus flower rises from 'impure, muddy waters' characterises purity and perfection and provides an ideal for Buddhists, who aim to live a life of honesty and purity.^{3,7}

The lotus was considered the supreme plant in ancient Egypt because of its fragrant scent and its alternating life beneath and above the water, as well as its capacity to induce altered states of consciousness. The act of smelling the lotus is a common motif in ancient Egyptian iconography.⁸

Nymphaeas are well known for their intoxicant effect by shamans because of their alkaloid and glycoside content. In pharaonic Egypt, the blue lotus became a symbol of the sun rising out of the night, as well as the continual renewal of life. The Egyptian symbol of eternal life, the ankh, was composed of three plant stems or petioles knotted together, very likely from lotus. It is also likely that the sacredness of the lotus in pharaonic Egypt was also due to their use as drugs by priests and shamans who used the plant as an intoxicant for trances, and to make contact with the other world.⁸

In Hinduism, the Indian lotus has long been regarded as a sacred plant. It is considered the first-born of creation and as the magic

womb of the universe and the gods. Buddha strode over seven lotus flowers when he was born with the Bodhisattvas (future buddhas) and various saints. He was often depicted as sitting on lotus flowers.⁹

So important has the lotus been in Indian culture, that it has been adopted as the flower of India, to not only represent divinity and enlightenment, but fertility, long life and knowledge due to its longevity, and wealth associated with its many culinary uses.⁹

In Hinduism, the divinities Vishnu and Lakshmi are often portrayed on a pink lotus. The lotus is the symbol of what is divine and immortal in humanity. Additionally, it symbolises the realisation of inner potential. In Tantric and Yoga traditions, the lotus symbolises the potential of an individual to harness the flow of energy moving through the chakras.¹⁰

In Buddhist symbolism, the lotus represents purity of the body, speech and mind: floating above murky waters of material attachment and physical desire. According to legend, Buddha was born with the ability to walk with lotus flowers blooming everywhere he stepped.¹⁰

Ravenscroft explains that in ancient Egypt there were two main types of lotus that grew: the white and the blue (*Nymphaea caerulea*). The pink lotus was introduced into Egypt late in their civilisation from India. The most common lotus image in most Egyptian hieroglyphics is the blue lotus.¹¹

The Egyptians associated the lotus flower with the sun, which disappeared at night, only to re-emerge in the morning. The lotus came to symbolise the sun, creation and rebirth.¹¹

In Buddhism, the lotus is associated with purity, spiritual awakening and faithfulness. The flower is considered pure as it emerges from the murky waters to be perfectly clean. This was also associated with spiritual enlightenment.¹¹

In Buddhism, the different colours are associated with different aspects of Buddhism:¹¹

- *Blue lotus flower* is associated with a victory of the spirit over that of wisdom, intelligence and knowledge.
- *White lotus flower* symbolises Bodhi (being awakened) and represents a state of mental purity, and that of spiritual perfection. It is also associated with the pacification of one's nature.



Lakshmi portrayed on a pink lotus

- *Pink lotus flower* is considered the supreme lotus and is considered to be the true lotus of Buddha.

In Hinduism, the lotus flower is associated with beauty, fertility, spirituality and eternity. Many of the Hindu gods and goddesses are associated with the flower. For example, the goddess of prosperity, Laxmi, is usually depicted as seated atop of a fully opened lotus flower. Brahma, the God of creation is depicted as emerging from a lotus that crawls from the naval of Lord Vishnu.¹¹

It is interesting to note that the open lotus flower and the unopened lotus bud are also associated with human traits. The unopen bud represents a folded soul that has the ability to unfold and open itself up to the divine truth.¹¹

Traditional medicine

There are many therapeutic benefits attributed to different parts of the plant. Extracts from the seeds, flowers, leaves and roots. have all been reported to have varied therapeutic potential.²

Lotus leaves are used in traditional medicine to treat hypertension, diarrhea, fever, weakness, infection, skin inflammation, and body heat imbalance. They are also an effective treatment against abnormal bleeding such as hematemesis, epistaxis, hemoptysis, hematuria, and metrorrhagia.^{3,12} Extracts of the lotus leaves also exhibit strong antioxidant and free radical scavenging ability.³

All parts of *N. nucifera* are used for various medicinal purposes and in various systems of traditional medicine such as Ayurveda and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). The bioactive constituents of lotus are mainly alkaloids and flavonoids. The whole plant is used as an astringent, emollient and diuretic.

It was used in the treatment of diarrhoea, tissue inflammation and homeostasis.¹²

The extract from the rhizome was used as an antidiabetic and for its anti-inflammatory properties due to the presence of a steroidal triterpenoid. The flowers are used to treat diarrhoea, cholera, fever and hyperdipsia.¹²

The seeds and fruits are also astringent and can be used for the treatment of various skin diseases, hyperdipsia, halitosis and menorrhagia. Mixed with honey and the seed powder is useful for treating cough. Ghee, lotus roots, milk and gold potentiate strength and virility. The

seeds are used in the treatment of tissue inflammation, cancer and skin diseases. The embryo of lotus seed is used in a TCM drug formulation known as Lian Zi Xin, useful for treating nervous disorders, insomnia, and cardiovascular diseases (hypertension and arrhythmia).¹²

Other uses

The lotus is an aquatic plant with edible, fragrant, decorative and medicinal uses. Lotus seeds are extensively consumed as food in China and Japan, and are used in Ayurvedic medicine. The seeds and roots of lotus are regarded as a popular medicinal herb and the alkaloid (liensinine) extracted from them is effective for treating arrhythmia.³

N. nucifera has been cultivated in China for more than 3,000 years, and is grown not only for its cultural and ornamental value, but for medicinal uses and for its edible seeds and rhizomes. In China, Japan and India, the rhizomes are roasted, pickled, candied or sliced and fried as chips. A paste made from the nutlets is used as a filling in 'mooncakes', traditional Chinese pastries.⁴

Aromatherapy uses

Clinical aromatherapy

A literature search could not attribute pink lotus absolute with any therapeutic activities associated with the lotus plant. This means that we must be very careful not to assign any of the therapeutic qualities associated with the plant to the absolute. The main use of lotus absolute is in perfumery. The scent of the flower perfectly captured in the absolute epitomises the sacred qualities that have been assigned to the flower and the plant.

Subtle

Candice Covington, author of *Essential oils in Spiritual Practice*, states that lotus teaches us that we must pass through stages of development and growth to reach the sweet-smelling full bloom of self. She explains that the lotus starts life in the mud, and reaches faithfully upward toward the sun until it attains its full expression of beauty.¹³

This radiant oil first stimulates you at the unconscious level, bringing desire to become self-actualized, and then support this path as your budding consciousness learns the lessons offered from each chakra center. The ultimate goal of this oil is to usher you in to a state of enlightenment.

Lotus holds the vibration of the entire path of enlightenment and is a powerful teacher and guide.¹³

References

1. Shapiro R. *Pink lotus absolute*. Perfumer & Flavorist, 2004;29:74-78.
2. Mukherjee PK, et al. *The sacred lotus (Nelumbo nucifera) – phytochemical and therapeutic profile*. Journal of Pharmacy and Pharmacology. 2009;61(4):407-422. doi:10.1211/jpp.61.04.0001
3. Moro CF et al. *Lotus – a source of food and medicine: current status and future perspectives in context of the seed proteomics*. International Journal of Life Sciences. 2013;7(1):1-5. doi:10.3126/ijls.v7i1.6394
4. *Nelumbo nucifera*. Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Downloaded on 21 Oct 2019 from <http://powo.science.kew.org/taxon/urn:lsid:ipni.org:names:605422-1>
5. Shen-Miller J et al. *Exceptional seed longevity and robust growth: ancient sacred lotus from China*. American Journal of Botany. 1995;82(11):1367-1380. Doi:10.1002/j.1537.1995.tb12673.xff
6. Rhind JP. *Listening to scent – an olfactory journey with aromatic plants and their extracts*. Singing Dragon, London, 2014.
7. Siddiqui, Kiran Shahid. *Significance of lotus depiction in the Gandhara art*. Pakistan Historical Society. Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society. 2012;60(3).
8. Abram DP. *Seven scents – healing and the aromatic imagination*. Singing Dragon, London, 2017.
9. Kandeler R, Ullrich WR. *Symbolism of plants: examples from European-Mediterranean culture presented with biology and history of art*. Journal of Experimental Botany. 2009;60(9):2361-2464. doi: 10.1093/jxb/erp166
10. *Nelumbo nucifera*. Downloaded on 21 Oct 2019 from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/nelumbo_nucifera
11. Ravenscroft D. *Learn about the meanings and symbolisms associated with the beautiful lotus flower*. Downloaded on 20 Oct 2019 from <https://www.lotusflowermeaning.net/>
12. Paudel KR, Panth N. *Phytochemical profile and biological activity of Nelumbo nucifera*. Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine. 2015; Article ID 789124. doi: 10.1155/2015/789124
13. Covington C. *Essential oils in spiritual practice – working with the chakras, divine archetypes, and the five great elements*. Healing Art Press, Rochester, 2017.

Lotus flower – Sarasak Suwanmake | Dreamstime.com

Lakshmi – Wellcome Collection.