



The flower



The fruit

### *The Fish Poison tree*

The Fish Poison tree *Barringtonia asiatica* is a magnificent tree with a very large square fruit about 9cm long which can float thousands of miles and remain viable for up to two years. A visitor to Chagos in 1860 commented: "On nearly every part of the islands grow at intervals great clumps of gigantic trees, the Rose Tree [Barringtonia] which attain an enormous height even to 200 feet."

This tree has large shiny greenish bronze leaves which turn yellow with age and are up to 40cm long looking much like an open cos lettuce. Groups of green buds terminate the leaf branches and on consecutive nights one bud in each group opens rapidly. The beautiful scented flowers have 4 oblong white petals surrounding scores of pink filaments each ending in a rose pink anther. The flowers open at night, when they are pollinated by the Humming Bird Hawkmoth, *Hippotion velox/Macroglossum stellatarum*, and probably also by the Convolvulus Hawkmoth, *Agrius convolvuli*. The flowers fade and fall the following day, usually by noon, and can be seen lying on the sandy lagoon shore until the incoming tide sweeps them away. The square brown apple-sized fruits with a fibrous outer husk are often cast up on the beach.

All parts of the tree contain saponin, a poison. The seeds and other parts of the plant are pounded, pulped or grated to release the poison which is used to stun and capture fish.

These trees are still plentiful in Chagos and can easily be seen in, for example, Diego Garcia on the lagoon shore south of the airfield. They have also been planted in ton for ornament.

It is named Barringtonia, after Hon. Daines Barrington (1727-1800), an English naturalist who was a correspondent of Gilbert White and a close friend of Joseph Banks.

*The Chagos Conservation Trust is a charity (Registered in the UK No. 1031561) established in 1992 whose aims are to promote conservation, scientific and historical research and to advance education concerning the archipelago. The Trust is a non political association.*

*The annual membership subscription costs only £20/\$40, or £100/\$200 for six years.*

For more information visit [www.chagos-trust.org](http://www.chagos-trust.org)