



Ethnobotanical Leaflets



The Lotus And The Nile

By Christopher Rutledge

The blue lotus (*Nymphaea caerulea*) belongs to the Nymphaeaceae (Water-Lily) family. The blue lotus has several common names including: Egyptian lotus, blue water lily, and sacred lily of the Nile. It should not be confused with the "blue lily" or *Agapanthus africanus*, a plant of an entirely different genus (Anonymous, 1999). Be careful also not to confuse it with the *Nymphaea lotus*, which is the "white lotus". Fossils of this plant have been dated back to the Jurassic period, about 160 million years ago. Amazingly, the fossils suggest that the blue lotus has not changed much. Other records indicate wide dispersal of this flower before the Ice Age (Edwards, 1998).

It is important to first explain a few things about the nature of the blue lotus. The blue lotus or water-lily, is a floating aquatic plant that is known for its colorful and aromatic flowers. The leaves are waxy, leathery and dark green with a reddish-purple color underneath (Edwards, 1998). The genus *Nymphaea* includes both tropical and hardy (cold-tolerant) species. There are also night-bloomers and day-bloomers. The tropical day-bloomers are the lotus that was used by the Egyptians (Edwards, 1998). The flowers of many species of lotus have the shocking habit of folding their petals and sinking beneath the water's surface during the night and resurfacing the next day to bloom again (Philbrick and Les, 1996).

Many ancient cultures found the blue lotus to be of great use and of esteemed status. In Asia and Africa, the blue lotus symbolized immortality in recognition of the plant's ability to survive and resprout after long droughts, and the seed's ability to remain viable for many years (Edwards, 1998). In China it was regarded as a religious symbol, and a symbol of feminine beauty. Similarly in India, it was compared with the human female form, and in their legends they believe that Brahma, their creator of the universe, sprang from a lotus-like blossom (Edwards, 1998).

The Japanese saw a representation of purity and the juxtaposition of good and evil, and the Buddhist's have a prayer mentioning the lotus, "Omi! Mani padme hum!" which is interpreted as, "Oh!, the jewel in the lotus flower!" (Edwards, 1998). The Greeks also admired the blue lotus. They associated the flowers with the mythical nymphs and beautiful maidens thought to inhabit the forests and mountains (Edwards, 1998).

The people of Ancient Egypt (Kemet), used the blue lotus extensively in their art and in their everyday uses. The name (Kemet), which means "the land of the black", is the original name of Ancient Egypt given by the people who once inhabited the land (Kwesi, 1996). When the blue lotus was used in their artwork it was triangular shaped when viewed from the side. Flowers occur frequently in their art, with the blue lotus and papyrus being the most common. There were also drawings of people smelling the lotus flower, which some believe was used to induce stimulation or a state of utopia (Anonymous, 1999). The idea of the blue lotus flower was also associated with cups and bowls. They usually designed their Chalices and wine glasses as the lotus, which is still in common use today, as the champagne glass (Morenz, 1973).

The primary reason for the use of the blue lotus as a symbol by the Ancient Egyptians was because it symbolized the origin of life, According to Watterson (1984), they equated the Creator-god with the blue lotus, which is believed to have emerged at some point in time from the primeval ocean, Nun. Ra their primary god, was believed to have first appeared as a beautiful child floating on a great blue lotus (Watterson, 1984).

To the Ancient Egyptians, the blue lotus was the most perfect type of flower. The blue lotus, which had a delightful perfume, suggested to the Ancient Egyptians the perfume of Ra's sweat, the divine essence (Morenz, 1973). The evolution of life was associated with the origin of solid matter. They paralleled biogony with cosmogony. Kemetic religion was a fusion of spirituality and science (Amen, 1997).

The Ancient Egyptians used the blue lotus as a symbol of the origin of life, but they also used the shape of the Nile River and its tributaries to symbolize the origin of life also (Kwesi, 1996). The blue lotus is shaped the same as the Nile and its tributaries, when viewed from above. The Ancient Egyptians believe the Nile Valley area is the birthplace of human civilization, which is why the Nile Rivers are shaped like fallopian tubes, symbolizing birth of mankind (Kwesi, 1996).

The blue lotus had a variety of meanings and uses. The blue lotus was used in various areas such as: medicine, food, and funerary ceremonies. The Ancient Egyptians have made tonics from the blue lotus for ailments such as liver disease (Morenz, 1973). The blue lotus can also be used to make bread. First, they extract the seeds, then they allow for them to dry in the sun, then they pound them to flour, add milk then bake (Edwards, 1998). The root was also eaten, similar to the cassava, except it was sweet and round and about the size of an apple.

Other uses of the blue lotus were for funerary ceremonies. There are several adornments placed within the sarcophagi on the bodies. Some are adorned with gold, amulets of various meanings, flowers including the lotus, and numerous other items (Morenz, 1973). Records from the Ancient Egyptian pyramids show that the flowers were also heaped upon the honored dead and the floral fragrance was thought to dispel the stench of death (Edwards, 1998).

The blue lotus had a wide variety of uses and meanings to various cultures. They were used for artistic purposes, for symbols, to make bread, to make perfume, to make medicine and for funerary purposes.

The blue lotus has had a profound impact on human society, and human civilization, including: the Ancient Egyptians, the Chinese, the Japanese, the people of India, the Buddhists, the Greeks and numerous other cultures around the world.

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