

General

The Carob Tree (*Ceratonia siliqua* L.) belongs to the family of *Caesalpiniaceae*. The *Ceratonia* genus includes only one species, *C. siliqua*, which is widely distributed along the coastal Mediterranean region from Portugal to Syria, where the Carob tree is considered to have originated from.

Description

The Carob tree is a long living evergreen tree, attaining a height of up to 15 m or more; it has a thick and wide, semi-spherical broad crown, grayish bark and sturdy branches. The leaves are compound – pinnate, with 2 - 4 (to 6) pairs of coriaceous, dark green, orbicular or ovate, shiny above, leaflets, 2 - 5 cm long and 1.5 - 4 cm wide. The flowers are unisexual or hermaphrodite, small and green tinted, with a strong odour, spirally arranged along the spurs from old wood. It blossoms from September to November. Its fruit is a large pod (carob, *teratsi* or *xylokerato*), 1.5 – 3 x 10 – 20 cm, of dark brown colour and edible. It is fully ripe from the end of August until September. In Cyprus there are three varieties of the Carob tree, the Tilliria species, the “*kountourka*” and the “*koumpota*”.

Distribution – Habitat

A native plant of Cyprus, mainly found in maquis areas, at an altitude of 0 – 600 m as a wild species and up to 1000 m as a cultivated tree. Wild populations occur in the Akamas area, Episkopi, the Lemesos forest, Lefkara, Kalavastos, Stavrovouni, Pentadaktylos mountain range and Karpasia peninsula. It can be found in all coastal regions of the Mediterranean, from Portugal to Syria. It grows easily on sunny positions, it can withstand poor and dry soils but it is rather sensitive to frost.

Historical background - Uses

A few years back, the Carob tree was a very important tree to the economy of the island of Cyprus and its fruit was given the name of “black gold” exactly because it was considered as gold for many of the agricultural areas of the island as it was the main source of income. Gradually, however, because of increased fruit collection costs and strong competition from other mediterranean countries, the cultivation of the Carob tree declined.

This tree is closely related to the history of the people of the Mediterranean region and it is often referred to by many ancient historians. The dried up seeds of the Carob tree were used for weighing spices in Africa as well as gold and precious stones in India. The “carat” which is used as a means for measuring originates from the weight of the carob seed (200 milligrams). The fruits of the tree, the well known carobs, are rich in sugars and nutrients and they were part of peoples’ nutrition especially during periods of hardship, such as when John the Baptist was in the desert for a long period (that is why the Europeans call it St. John’s bread). The fruit of the carob tree when grounded becomes an excellent food for many domestic, herbivorous animals.

In Cyprus the fruit is used to produce carob honey (*haroupomelo* or *teratsomelo*) and *pastelli* (carob toffee). Seeds are also used in their grounded form. The Carob tree timber produces excellent firewood.

Protection and Management

Unfortunately, during the last twenty years, the number of carob trees is declining at an increasing rate, since many trees are used for firewood or charcoal, due to the lack of interest for their cultivation. The Forestry Department plants many Carob trees in the lowlands in an effort to maintain a satisfactory percentage of this beautiful tree which enhances the rural landscape. In recent

years, it has been included in the Forest Legislation and a permit from the Forestry Department is required in order to cut down a Carob tree.

Together with the olive tree, they are basic constituents of the habitat type 9320 (*Oleo-ceratonion*), *Olea* and *Ceratonia* forests (Olive tree and Carob tree forests) of Annex I of the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC). A considerable number of areas on the island, has been included in the Natura 2000 network and Cyprus is under obligation to take all necessary administrative and other measures to preserve and restore this natural habitat at a satisfactory condition.

Finally, many century old Carob trees have been selected and have been declared as protected trees because of their outstanding ecological and cultural value. Such examples are the Carob Tree in the village of Steni in Pafos, the Carob tree in Polemidia in the Lemesos district and many others.

The tree of the Year 2008 Carob Tree (*Ceratonia siliqua* L.)



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