

Trees of Sri Lanka

Words & photography by Ian Lockwood.

For a small island, Sri Lanka is blessed with a diversity of habitats and vegetation zones. The wet, dry, and intermediate zones all have unique and distinctive plant life. Sri Lanka's trees are usually confined to one of these zones, although some species are spread more widely across the island. In the wet zone, where the central highlands are located, a wide variety of trees and vegetation is based on the vertical contours of the landscape. Colombo and its environs were once dominated

by lowland rainforest vegetation, while the hilly area that surrounds Hatton and Nuwara Eliya is known for its montane and cloud forests. In many cultures, trees have religious and spiritual significance, with the *Ficus* species holy to Buddhists and Hindus. Represented in this photo essay is a small sample of the great variety and beauty of Sri Lanka's trees. The images form an ongoing portfolio of black and white images that Ian is putting together on Sri Lanka's natural history heritage.

1. Elephants at Viharamahadevi Park, Colombo.
Mahouts and their elephants rest in the shade of an unidentified tree at Viharamahadevi Park, in a leafy part of Colombo. The elephants are preparing to participate in the annual perahera (procession) of the Gangaramaya temple beside Beira Lake.

2. Tree Ferns, Horton Plains National Park.
Large tree ferns (*Cyathea crinita*) at the edge of cloud forest in Horton Plains National Park. Sri Lanka's cloud forests harbour impressive numbers of endemic plants, and amphibian and bird species. These tree ferns are endemic to Sri Lanka's central highlands and the southern Western Ghats of India.

3. Bo Tree Leaves, Pelawatte.
Leaves of a Bo tree (*Ficus religiosa*) at a small temple in the Colombo suburb of Pelawatte. This species, famously associated with the enlightenment of Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha), has the greatest religious significance amongst all of Sri Lanka's plants.

4. Banyan, Colombo University.
A large banyan (*Ficus benghalensis*) in front of the Department of Zoology at Colombo University.

5. Ethagala Rock & Trees, Kurunegala.
Moist deciduous forest grows from cracks on the exfoliated granite face of Ethagala (Elephant Rock) in Kurunegala. The large rock hill, from which the name 'Kurunegala' is derived, has a commanding view of this former capital of Sri Lanka. Its forests and trees provide a habitat for animals and birds in a fast-growing urban settlement.



1

1 & 2. Peradeniya Java Fig, Peradeniya Botanical Gardens.

This enormous Java fig (*Ficus benjamina*) is a focal point at the renowned Royal Botanic Gardens, Peradeniya, near Kandy. It is a species that is often used as a potted ornamental plant in tropical and temperate climates. The specimen at Peradeniya has been allowed to spread over an area of 2,500 square metres.

3. Rain trees on Reid Avenue, Colombo.

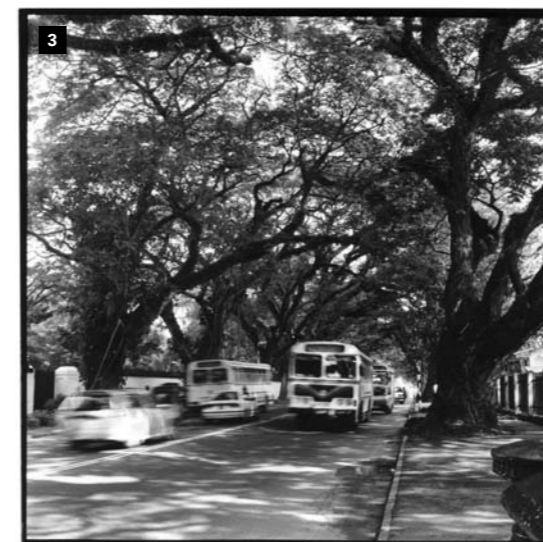
Traffic on Reid Avenue, in a salubrious suburb of Colombo, flows busily under the arches of giant rain trees (*Albizia saman*). Unlike many Asian cities, Colombo retains many of the large shade trees that were planted in colonial times to reduce heat and improve the quality of air.

A Floral Oasis.

The Royal Botanic Gardens, Peradeniya is only a short *tuk-tuk* ride from the centre of Kandy. Open daily, it is second only to London's Kew Gardens in terms of flora and fauna diversity. Pack a picnic and make a day of exploring the 4,000 species to be found in its 59 hectares. Highlights include the palm avenue and spice gardens, 300 types of orchid, a rare double coconut, and colony of resident fruit bats.



2



3

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1. *Calophyllum walkeri* in Mist, Horton Plains National Park.

A clump of large *Calophyllum walkeri* trees stands out amidst cloud forest 'dieback' in Horton Plains National Park. Ecologists are unsure of why this undisturbed habitat has experienced significant dieback in the last few decades, with climate change and acid precipitation having been suggested as possible causes.

2. Shade tree in tea estate, Knuckles Range.

Rain tree (*Albizia saman*) grown for shade in a tea estate on the edge of the remote Knuckles Conservation Area.



Ian Lockwood teaches geography and environmental systems at the Overseas School of Colombo.



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