



Brazilwood common name for several trees of the family Leguminosae ( [pulse](#) family) whose wood yields a red dye. The dye has largely been replaced by synthetic dyes for fabrics, but it is still used in high-quality red inks. The bright red wood, which takes a high polish, is used in cabinetwork and for making violin bows. The East Indian redwood, or sapanwood ( *Caesalpinia sappan* ), was called "bresel wood" when it was first imported to Europe in the Middle Ages; Portuguese explorers used this name for a similar South American tree ( *C. echinata* ), from which the name Brazil for its native country purportedly derives. The latter species has been severely depleted in its native range, and international trade in the raw wood is now regulated. Brazilwoods are classified in the division [Magnoliophyta](#) , class Magnoliopsida, order Rosales, family Leguminosae.

Brazilwood or Pau-Brasil, sometimes known as Pernambuco (*Caesalpinia echinata* syn. *Guilandina echinata* (Lam.) Spreng.) is a Brazilian timber tree. This plant has a dense, orange-red wood (which takes a high shine), and it is the premier wood used for making bows for string instruments from the violin family. The wood also yields a red dye called brazilin, which oxidizes to brazilein.

#### Etymology

When Portuguese explorers found these trees of a deep red hue inside on the coast of South America, they used the name pau-brasil to describe them. Pau is Portuguese for "wood", and brasil is said to have come from brasa, Portuguese for "ember". This name had been earlier used to describe a different species of tree which was found in Asia and other places and which also produced red dye; but the South American trees soon became the better source of red dye. Brazilwood trees were such a large part of the exports and economy of the land that the country which sprang up in that part of the world took its name from them and is now called Brazil.

Botanically, several tree species are involved, all in the family Fabaceae (the pulse family). The term "Brazilwood" is most often used to refer to the species *Caesalpinia echinata*, but it is also applied to other species. This *Caesalpinia echinata* is also known as Pau-de-Pernambuco (Named after the state of Pernambuco in the Nordeste [north-east] region of Brazil).

In the bow making business, the best-quality wood bows are made from *Caesalpinia echinata*, commonly known in the trade as "Pernambuco Wood"; bows of lesser quality wood are made from other tropical species, often called "Brazilwood". Thus, the terms "Pernambuco" and "Brazilwood" — as used in the stringed instruments bows — refer to completely different species. Examples of "Brazilwood" species used for bows include Pink Ipê (*Tabebuia impetiginosa*), Massaranduba (*Manilkara bidentata*) and Palo Brasil (*Haematoxylum brasiletto*).

#### Historical importance

An illustration of the tree leaves and flowers. In the 15th and 16th centuries, brazilwood was highly valued in Europe and quite difficult to get. Coming from Asia, it was traded in powder form and used as a red dye in the manufacture of luxury textiles, such as velvet, in high demand during the Renaissance. When Portuguese navigators discovered present-day Brazil, on April 22, 1500, they immediately saw that brazilwood was extremely abundant along the coast and in its hinterland, along the rivers. In a few years, a hectic and very profitable operation for felling and transporting by shipping all the brazilwood logs they could get was established, as a crown-granted Portuguese monopoly. The rich commerce which soon followed stimulated other nations to try to harvest and smuggle brazilwood contraband out of Brazil, or even corsairs attacking loaded Portuguese ships in order to steal their cargo. For example, the unsuccessful attempt of a French expedition led by Nicolas Durand de Villegaignon, vice-admiral of Brittany and corsair under the King, in 1555, to establish a colony in present-day Rio de Janeiro (France Antarctique) was motivated in part by the bounty generated by economic exploitation of brazilwood. In addition, this plant is also cited in *Flora Brasiliensis* by Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius.