

Abrus precatorius

[Synonyms : *Abrus abrus*, *Abrus cyaneus*, *Abrus frutex*, *Abrus maculatus*, *Abrus minor*, *Abrus pauciflorus*, *Abrus precatorius* var. *novo-guineensis*, *Abrus squamulosus*, *Abrus tunguensis*, *Abrus wittei*, *Glycine abrus*]

JEQUIRITY is a semi-evergreen, climbing or trailing vine. Native to India, South America and West Africa it has small pea-like, pink to mauve flowers.

It is also known as *Akar saga* (Malay), Bod eyes, *Chanothi-lal* (Gujarati), Chinese red beans, Coral bead vine, Coral pea, Crab's eyes, Crab's eye vine, Gidee-gidee, *Gundumani* (Tamil), *Gunja* (Marathi), *Habil er rus* (Arabic), Indian bead, Indian licorice, Indian liquorice, Jequirity bean, Jequirity seeds, Jumbie bead, Jumble beads, *Kakani* (Malayalam), *Kunch* (Bengali), *Kuntumani* (Thai), Ladybird beads, *Lele damu* (Fijian), Licorice-vine, Love bean, Love pea, Lucky beans, *Matamoho* (Tongan), *Matamoso* (Samoan), Mienie-mienie, *Olindawel* (Singhalese), Paternoster beans, Paternoster pea, Prayer beads, Prayer bean, Prayer plant, Precatory bean, Precatory pea, *Ratti* (Hindi), Rosary pea, Rosary plant, *Sága* (Filipino/Tagalog), *Saga leutik* (Sundanese), *Saga telik* (Javanese), Seminole bead, Weather plant, Weather vine, and Wild liquorice.

Warning – the plant is extremely poisonous (particularly the seeds) – even from very small amounts of the plant brought into contact with wounds. Reaction may be delayed for two days. It can cause loss of appetite, nausea, diarrhoea, abdominal pain, vomiting, purging, temperature fluctuation, drowsiness, colic, inco-ordination, paralysis and death. (Thus necklaces made from the seeds could be lethal if chewed or swallowed.) The plant is as poisonous for livestock.

The plant is now banned in some places.

Precatorius is derived from Latin *precatio* (a begging, request, prayer) meaning 'relating to prayer' with reference to the seeds which have been used to make rosaries.

The very old and traditional Ganda system of weighing, employed by the goldsmiths in India used the jequirity seeds as weights (they weigh about 1 carat each) – for which purpose they were sometimes called *rati*. However the system from which this one was derived used double the weight of a jequirity seed. In the earlier system the red seeds of red sandalwood (*Adenanthera pavonina* – *adenanthera* means 'goldsmith' in Arabic) also fulfilled the role of weights and they are twice as heavy as jequirity seeds. It is understood that the Koh-i-noor diamond was weighed with jequirity seeds.

The very hard, glossy dried seeds have long held an attraction because of their colours (the upper third black and the remaining lower part vermilion red with a black spot). They have been fashioned into bracelets, collars and necklaces (as well as providing material for ornament decoration eg. for the eyes of figurines) not just locally but in countries as far flung as the Netherlands and the West Indies. In the late 17th Century authorities recorded even then how Dutch ladies adorned themselves with jequirity beads often mixed with pearls.

The bead necklaces familiar locally can be dangerous if the beads are chewed and swallowed. Should the seed ie. bead, pass through the body without any puncture in its hard glossy coating no harm will come to the consumer as the poison will be contained within the fruit. However this danger is no longer confined to jequirity's native habitat where its

hazardous nature will be relatively familiar – and this is well illustrated by an instance which authorities note occurred thousands of miles away in Britain in 1990. There a rattle bought in the Midlands at a Cambridge Fair split open to reveal some unusual beads. Fortunately these were shown to a botanist who immediately identified them as jequirity seeds. Trading standards officers were rapidly informed and they had the unenviable task of tracing any others before a serious (and possibly fatal) accident could befall innocent purchasers. In fact the officials were successful in recovering rattles as far away from the Fair (relatively) as the English West Country.

Some authorities have noted that the stem fibre has been used locally for weaving baskets but others suspect that the fibre in question could well have been extracted from one of jequirity's close relatives.

In India if nowhere else jequirity has a very colourful past in its use for criminal poisoning of both man and beast. Most of this nefarious activity has been directed at cattle and livestock which have been killed with poisoned darts or arrows.

Medicinally, the plant has been used in Chinese medicine to treat fever. It has also been part of remedies for eye diseases in the Western world and some chronic skin disorders, and has been the basis of some contraceptives. Locally the leaves have been used to 'purify the blood' and in treatments for ulcers, stomach ailments, snake bites and intestinal worms. The root was once considered a remedy for sore throats and rheumatism. While in India and Malaysia the roots are still used as a poor quality alternative for liquorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) for treating coughs and colds. In India the root is also used locally to treat scorpion bites. The seeds have been used to treat some forms of cancer. The plant no longer plays a part in orthodox Western medicine because of its extremely poisonous nature.