

Balanites aegyptiaca

[Synonyms : *Agialida barteri* var. *aegyptiaca*, *Agialida senegalensis* var. *aegyptiaca*, *Agialida tombouctensis* var. *zizyphoides*, *Balanites roxburghii*, *Balanites zizyphoides*, *Ximenia aegyptiaca*]

BETU is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to Arabia, Israel and northern tropical Africa, particularly the Nile valley, it has small fragrant, greenish-white flowers.

It is also known as Bito tree, Desert date, Egyptian plum, False balsam, *Gari* (Telugu), Hairy date tree, *Heglik* (Arabic), *Hingan* (Bengali and Hindi), *Ingoriyo* (Gujarati), *Ingudi* (Sanskrit), *Nanjunda* (Tamil), Soap berry tree, and Thorn tree.

Oil known as ‘balanos oil’ is extracted from the fruit and seeds for local medicinal use.

Warning – a poisonous shrub. Large quantities can cause vomiting and diarrhoea. It is very poisonous for fish and for snails.

Aegyptiaca means ‘of or from Egypt’.

Betu is highly productive and it is understood that were it not for its poisonous saponins would be a valuable source of food and fodder. These saponins however explain not only its use in soap manufacture but also, locally, the use of the fruit pulp in laundering (as it has the capacity to form a soapy foam).

In some areas the leaves are eaten as a vegetable. The fruit are edible in moderate quantity, and are also eaten locally. In parts of Africa the date-like fruit also offer an ingredient for an alcoholic drink.

Betu was familiar in ancient Egypt. Honey found there by archaeologists in a 19th Dynasty tomb was analysed and it was shown that much of the pollen had come from this tree’s flowers.

Locally in India the flowers are woven into garlands. The bark provides fibre and also yields a fish poison.

In Ethiopia the heavy, moderately hard, yellow to brown wood lends itself to general carpentry, as well as being used for making walking sticks, clubs and ploughs, joists, and pestles and mortars. Locally the spiny branches are not only a source of fuel but also of material for making lion-proof fences for the protection of livestock.

Recent interest appears to lie however in its ability (through its root, bark, fruit-pulp and seeds) to kill both fresh water snails that harbour the parasitic worm, bilharzia, and free-living forms of the parasite itself. The disease caused by bilharzia is common throughout tropical countries and the application of extracts of betu could prove to be invaluable for millions of people.

Medicinally, the roots and bark have been used locally to treat worms. The plant has also been used to treat snake bites, and the seeds have been used in remedies for wind and coughs. Oil from the fruit, prized especially by the Arabs and known to them as *zachun*, has a reputation for healing wounds. The oil has also been used to treat rheumatism.