

Crescentia cujete

[Synonyms : *Crescentia acuminata*, *Crescentia angustifolia*, *Crescentia arborea*, *Crescentia cujete* var. *puberula*, *Crescentia cuneifolia*, *Crescentia fasciculata*, *Crescentia ovata*, *Crescentia plectantha*, *Crescentia spathulata*]

CALABASH TREE is an evergreen tree. Native to tropical America (particularly the West Indies) it has purple-veined, greenish-yellow flowers.

It is also known as *Berenuk* (Sundanese), *Bilayati* (Hindi), Calabash, *Calebasse* (Dominican, French, and French West Indian), Common calabash tree, Gourd, *Higüero* (Spanish), *Kalabaso* (Esperanto), *Kalbas* (Creole), Kalebas (Dutch, English), *Kalebassenbaum* (German), *Tabu kayu* (Malay), *Tiruvot-tukai* (Tamil), Tree calabash, West Indian calabash tree, and Wild calabash.

The unpleasant smelling flowers are pollinated by bats.

Warning – the fruit pulp is poisonous for small mammals and birds.

The very hard timber has been used for boat building and for making cartwheels. The darker veined, light brown wood is also good fuel. But it is the bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*) not the calabash tree from which calabash tobacco pipes were made.

The tree is often grown on vanilla (*Vanilla planifolia*) plantations as live vine supports.

The calabash tree has probably been most prized for its smooth, shiny green fruit that can be anything from 5-20 in. across. The young fruit are eaten locally pickled, and in Jamaica these pickles are often compared most favourably with pickled walnuts (*Juglans regia*). The cooked seeds have long provided a local vegetable. In Nicaragua the seeds are also used to make a drink. However it is the fruit shell that has been sought after for centuries.

When the pulp and seeds have been dug out the egg-shaped or round, hard fruit shell (usually after it has been smoked) then comes into its own. It is often called a gourd or, as a vessel for holding liquid, a calabash. It will take a fine polish. and is often intricately decorated. As a utensil the completed shells can provide bowls, dippers and cups (used in some places for drinking chocolate, *Theobroma cacao*). They have also been used as ornaments and have even ended up as musical instruments. Seed-filled, patterned gourds (with added handles) have long been popular as maracas and these are generally associated today with South American bands and orchestras.

Medicinally, the fruit pulp has not only been used locally as a laxative, but has also been an ingredient in poultices and in remedies for various chest complaints. A decoction of the bark has been used to clean wounds. In Barbados the pulp was once an ingredient in a poisonous potion used for abortions.