

Dieffenbachia seguine

[Synonyms : *Arum seguine*, *Arum seguinum*, *Caladium maculatum*, *Caladium pictum*, *Caladium seguinum*, *Dieffenbachia maculata*, *Dieffenbachia picta*, *Dieffenbachia plumieri*, *Dieffenbachia seguine*]

DUMBCANE is an evergreen perennial. Native to tropical America and the West Indies, it has a pale-yellow flower spike (spadix) surrounded by a leaf-like green shield (spathe).

It is also known as *Caladium* (German), *Canne d'eau* (West Indian), *Canne Seguine* (West Indian), *Dieffenbachia*, *Dieffenbachie pestrá* (Czech), *Dífenbachia pestrá* (Slovak), *Giftaron* (German), Poison arum, *Schierlingscaladium* (German), *Schweigrohr* (German), *Seguine d'eau* (West Indian), *Siguine* (West Indian), and Spotted dumbcane.

Warning – all parts, especially the sap, are poisonous. Biting or chewing the stem can cause burning sensations, oral irritation and pronounced swelling. The latter restricts breathing, swallowing and tongue movement for several days ie. paralysis of mouth, throat and vocal cords. The touch of the plant on bare skin can also cause dermatitis. This perennial is normally avoided by livestock for which it would be poisonous.

This plant was once used to torture slaves and was also said to have been used by Caribbean Indian tribes to poison their enemies. A Caribbean legend contends that several generations could be wiped out with one dose of it.

It is said that in Britain dumbcane was used years ago by journeyman gardeners for playing cruel practical jokes upon their peers. Apparently they would persuade the unwitting victim that the green and white stem was a variety of sugar cane (*Saccharum officinarum*), and when the gullible fellow bit into it he would immediately begin to suffer extremely painful and uncomfortable throat swellings that would prevent him from speaking for days.

In contrast to this alien reputation however some positive attributes seem to have been found now. American research at NASA at the turn of the 20th and 21st Centuries has identified useful air purification qualities in the shrub. Apparently the plant is believed to be able to dissipate formaldehyde present in interior environments.

Medicinally, the leaves have been used locally in treatments for rheumatism, and the plant has also provided a contraceptive.