

Ecballium elaterium

[Synonyms : *Bryonia elaterium*, *Ecballium officinale*, *Ecballium officinarum*, *Ecballium purgans*, *Elaterium cordifolium*, *Momordica elaterium*]

SQUIRTING CUCUMBER is a trailing perennial. Native to the Mediterranean, it has small, green-veined, yellowish-white flowers.

It is also known as *Agriangouriá* (Greek), Elaterium fruit, Exploding cucumber, *Faqqus il-hmir* (Maltese), *Pikrangouriá* (Greek), *Springgurka* (Swedish), *Spritzgurke* (German), *Sprutgurka* (Swedish), *Tekvičnik striekavý* (Slovak), *Tykvice stříkavá* (Czech), and Wild cucumber.

The ripe fruit eventually burst (because of the increasing pressure of the accumulating fluid inside) and pulp and seeds are forcibly ejected to disperse the seeds up to 6 ft. away. The plant's potency is variable from season to season.

The fruit are gathered in the Summer just before they are mature and the juicy sediment is extracted i.e. Elaterium, also known as white elaterium or English elaterium.

Warning – the plant, especially the fruit, is very poisonous. It can only be used by a qualified medical practitioner. Normal doses can cause severe gastroenteritis and large or excessive doses can cause nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea and death. The juice of the plant can cause irritation on exposed skin.

Elaterium is derived from Greek *elaterio-* (driven away) meaning 'to cast out' with reference to the forcible ejection of seeds from the ripe fruit.

Records of Dioscorides, the noted 1st Century Greek physician, describe the preparation of elaterium from the leaves and roots of squirting cucumber. This was used as a drastic purge. It was also referred to by the Greek physician, Hippocrates (c.460-377 BC or 359 BC) and the Greek philosopher, Theophrastus (c.372-c.287 BC). In the 16th Century this poisonous plant was being cultivated all over Europe for the juicy sediment from the unripe fruit which dries to a yellowish powder. French records describe how a doctor was said to have suffered serious symptoms and this was only from transporting some seeds in his hat from the *Jardin des Plantes* to his Paris home.

In the past herbalists recommended the dried sediment (or flakes) deposited in the juice for treating fluid retention. Today its main use is in research, although it can be part of treatment for shingles, fluid retention, rheumatism and paralysis. In Asia it has also been used for treating malaria.