

Jatropha curcas

[Synonyms : *Castiglionia lobata*, *Curcas curcas*, *Curcas indica*, *Curcas purgans*, *Jatropha moluccana*]

PHYSIC NUT is a succulent, deciduous tree-like shrub. Native to tropical America it has tiny indistinct, yellowish-green flowers.

It is also known as *Akanedua* (Twi), *Bagbherenda* (Bengali, Hindi), Barbados nut, Body cutter, Curcas bean, Fignut, French physic nut, *Habb-el-meluk* (Arabic), *Jarak belanda* (Malay), *Jarak budeg* (Javanese), *Jarak kosta* (Sundanese), *Kanameranda* (Sanskrit), *Katiamudamu* (Telugu), *Kattamanakku* (Tamil), *Kattavanakku* (Malayalam), *Médecinier* (West Indian), *Médecinier Barrié* (West Indian), *Médecinier béne* (French), *Medsinyen batà* (Creole), *Pinhão branco* (Portuguese), Puba-oil, Pulza, *Purgiernuss* (German), Purging nut, Purqueira-oil, *Rata-endaru* (Singhalese), *Sabudam* (Thai), *Safed arand* (Hindi), and *Túbang-bákod* (Thai).

An unpleasant-smelling oil that has a pale yellow colour that becomes reddish upon exposure to air, is extracted from the seeds.

Warning – the leaves, the seeds (or 1 seed) or an overdose of oil can (in under an hour) cause a burning sensation in the throat, diarrhoea, gastroenteritis and vomiting. In addition the seeds may cause deafness, dizziness, muscular cramps, pupil dilation, dehydration, coma and possibly death. The sap (latex) accidentally splashed in the eyes is said to be able to cause temporary blindness, while on the skin it can cause rashes and blistering. Child deaths have been recorded from the plant. It is also poisonous for animals.

Curcas was an ancient name for *Jatropha*.

Physic nut was introduced to Africa (from tropical America) where in one region it was adopted as a graveyard shrub.

Often grown as a hedging plant its poisonous seed oil (which burns without smoke) is occasionally used for lighting. At one time, it was imported by Portugal for soap and candle manufacture.

In Africa the latex has not only been made into soap but, with the addition of salt, has also been used as a toothpaste. There also the burning leaves have provided a fumigant for homes to rid them of bedbugs. And sticks of dried seeds dipped in palm oil have provided torches that would remain alight in the strongest winds.

The sap or latex has been used as a black dye in some regions. Apparently the sap will froth and Asian children have used it to blow bubbles through a bamboo stem. While in the Philippines it has been used to stun fish.

In some parts of Asia the leaves have been added to food as a flavouring.

Today the oil (known as *Jatropha* or *Curcas* oil) is used for lubrication and lighting, as well as the manufacture of candles and soap – and it is also used by the wool industry.

Medicinally, Caribbeans (and Africans) have long taken the seeds as a purgative and used the seed oil in remedies for venereal diseases, paralysis and other disorders. Other cultures, including the Indian, have used decoctions of the leaves for treating stomach ulcers, fever, diarrhoea and general illness, and also included leaves in poultices for treating skin ulcers, leprosy and rheumatism. The juice of the plant has been used to treat various skin problems, including eczema, scabies and ringworm. Pounded bark has provided a remedy

for venomous bites. The latex has been used to ease toothache and stem any bleeding. The plant is now attracting attention (with other related species) in orthodox Western medicine for possible qualities that may help in curing cancer.