

*Lagenaria siceraria*

[Synonyms : *Cucurbita idolatrica*, *Cucurbita lagenaria*, *Cucurbita leucantha*, *Cucurbita longissima*, *Cucurbita siceraria*, *Lagenaria idolatrica*, *Lagenaria lagenaria*, *Lagenaria leucantha*, *Lagenaria longissima*, *Lagenaria vulgaris*]

**BOTTLE GOURD** is an annual climbing vine. Probably native to Africa it has usually white flowers.

It is also known as *Alabu* (Sanskrit), *Bầu* (Vietnamese), Bitter bottle gourd, *Bogalao* (Assamese), Calabash, Calabash cucumber, Calabash gourd, Calabash marrow, *Calabaza* (Spanish), *Calebassier-courant* (French), Cucuzzi, *Diya-labu* (Singhalese), *Dudhi* (German), *Flaschenkürbis* (German), *Flaskkurbits* (Swedish), *Gewöhnlicher Flaschenkürbis* (German), *Kadvi-dudhi* (Gujarati), *Kalabasa* (Czech), *Kalbas-kouran* (Creole), *Kalebass* (Swedish), *Kalebasse* (German), *Kashiphal* (Hindi), *Kodulau* (Bengali), *Kora* (Twi), *Kukuk* (Sundanese), *Labu air* (Javanese and Malay), *Lauki* (Hindi and Punjabi), *Nam tao* (Thai), *Qar' silāhi* (Arabic), *Rungu* (Kikuyu), *Sorakai* (Tamil), *Sorakaya* (Telugu), *Toa* (Twi), Trumpet gourd, *Wu lo kwa* (Chinese), White-flowered gourd, and White pumpkin.

There are many varieties.

The smooth light green fruit (usually bottle-shaped) of the bottle gourd have been confused with those of the gourd melon (*Benincasa hispida*).

*Siceraria* is derived from Latin *sicera* (intoxicating drink).

An indication of the importance of the use of the fruit as drinking vessels is apparent from the name *Kora* that can also be used for a measure of palm wine.

The distribution of the bottle gourd throughout the tropical and sub-tropical regions has been the subject of much debate amongst professionals. As the gourds can float in seawater for up to 2 years and the seeds will still germinate afterwards, many believe that the sea currents played as large a part as man (if not a greater one) in its introduction into new areas – and that most of the movement was from East to West. This last is thought provoking, even for the layman, if it is noted that archaeological evidence shows that the bottle gourd has been grown in South America for thousands of years.

Although the fruit flesh when unripe and boiled is wholesome, its bitterness (even in the young fruits of relatively sweeter varieties) has been sufficient to deter its general use as a food source.

For thousands of years the dried fruits have provided liquid containers in many different countries. {These retain the smell and taste of any liquid with which it is filled.} Remains dating back to about 7000 BC have been found in caves in Mexico. In Egypt pharaohs' tombs have revealed specimens from about 3500-3300 BC, and those discovered in Peruvian burial sites of about 3000 BC also indicate that the seeds provided a food for local South American Indian tribes. Polynesians (who traversed the seas thousands of years ago and gained a formidable name as seamen) carried their drinking water with them in large bottle gourds. Still today herdsmen of the Maasai tribe in East Africa depend on milk mixed with cow's blood as their main food when they roam long distances with their livestock – and as for centuries past this is still carried in bottle gourds that are covered in leather to keep them cool. Most peoples decorated the outsides

of these natural containers with traditional designs, and in China particularly the fruit have been celebrated in its many shapes in wood, jade and precious metals. Today some parts of the world still use the fruit shells as a water flask or utensil for palm toddy.

Although the fruit shells were used primarily as liquid containers the variety of their other uses has been wide-ranging from floats on fish-nets to resonators in musical instruments eg. the marimba – and in the Philippines half shells have even been made into hats. It is the bottle gourd not the calabash tree (*Crescentia cujete*) from which calabash tobacco pipes were made. Perhaps one of the most unexpected applications has been recorded for tribes in what is now Papua New Guinea and Indonesian Irian Jaya (or Western New Guinea) who fashioned the gourds into penis sheaths.

One unusual function for bottle gourds, apparently still recognized today, is as a symbol of virginity (or its loss). Virginity before marriage is highly respected by the South African Venda tribe. Engaged girls attend a special Domba ‘sex school’ that is staffed by experienced older women. At the end of the training the girls are presented with small bottle gourds that must be given to their respective grooms immediately before their wedding night. Each girl’s virginity is tested by the teacher prior to this presentation and the bottle’s neck is cut off if her virginity is believed to have been violated.

In North America bottle gourd was familiar to many Indian tribes. It seems that some of the Chippewa ate young gourds before their skin hardened – and that the Cherokee also viewed them as food. But bottle gourd was probably of far greater importance to North American Indian tribes in other ways.

Records show that the gourd provided cooking tools such as ladles or cups and bowls for many tribes, including the Keresan, Houma, some of the Chippewa, the Cherokee, Papago, Navajo, Seminole and Yuma Indians. The Havasupai are noted particularly as having used it for a water container carried with them when travelling and the Hopi buried their dead with such a water holder – only these last normally had a covering of net cord. Use of them by the Hopi Indians was not confined to mourning however as they not only incorporated them into some of their masks (usually as flowers, horns or noses) but the gourds also served them as sacred containers – and they helped their hunters to mimic the sounds of deer. (The plant also provided the Hopi with material for their prayer sticks.)

Apart from the foregoing perhaps one of its most important uses for many of the tribes, including the Cocopa, Havasupai, Pima, Houma, Keresan, Mohave, Ponca, Papago, Navajo, Iroquois, Dakota, Hopi, Omaha, Yuma and Cherokee was as a rattle, drum or megaphone used in ceremonies or for general singing and dancing, or toys.

There seem to have been a few North American Indian tribes who valued medicinal qualities in the plant. For instance the Houma Indians applied a crushed leaf poultice as a remedy for headaches, and the Cherokee applied a steeped seed poultice to boils.

As with other plants man has cultivated bottle gourd over hundreds and hundreds of years and this development has led to cultivated varieties that, when young, provide more edible vegetable matter than would be available from the bitter wild plant. These varieties seem to be eaten generally in Asia, particularly China, India and Japan.

Medicinally, the fruit flesh has been used in India as a purgative, and a decoction of the leaves has been used to treat jaundice.