

*Luffa cylindrica*

[Synonyms : *Cucumis fricatorius*, *Luffa acutangula* var. *subangulata*, *Luffa aegyptiaca*, *Luffa aegyptiaca* var. *peramara*, *Luffa cylindrica* var. *leiocarpa*, *Luffa cylindrica* var. *insularum*, *Luffa cylindrica* var. *multiflora*, *Luffa insularum*, *Luffa leiocarpa*, *Luffa subangulata*, *Melothria touchanensis*, *Momordica cylindrica*, *Momordica luffa*]

**LOOFAH** (English, Filipino/Tagalog, French) is a climbing annual vine. Native to tropical Asia and Africa it has yellow flowers.

It is also known as Bath sponge, *Belustra* (Indonesian), *Bēstru* (Javanese), Bitter apple, Bonnet gourd, *Borofo sapow* (Twi), *Būap kom* (Thai), *Calabaza de aristas* (Spanish), Common vegetable sponge, *Dhundul* (Bengali), Dishcloth gourd, Dish rag gourd, *Ghiatarui* (Hindi), *Guttibira* (Telugu), *Hechima* (Japanese), *Kētola* (Malay), *Ljufa* (Russian), Loofah gourd, *Lopang* (Sundanese), *Lufa* (Portuguese), *Luff* (Arabic), *Luffa* (Italian and Swedish), *Luffasvamp* (Danish), *Mafa'i* (Tongan), *Múróp huong* (Vietnamese), *Nenwa* (Dutch), *Niyan-vetakola* (Sinhalese), *Pataste* (Spanish), *Pesusienikurkku* (Finnish), *Pētola manis* (Malay), *Pikku* (Tamil), *Rajakoshataki* (Sanskrit), *Schwammgurke* (German), *Schwammkürbis* (German), *Shui kwa* (Chinese), Smooth loofah, Sponge gourd, Sponge luffa, Towel gourd, *Tsee gwa* (Chinese), Vegetable gourd, Vegetable sponge, *Vusovuso* (Fijian), and Wild cucumber.

The long marrow-like fruit are ripe when dry. The soft tissue decays and rots away leaving a hard, fibrous, flattened bundle, together with the formation of its eventual purging qualities. The sponge expands to its normal shape and size when it is immersed in water. (While the soft tissue remains whole the fruit is edible.)

*Cylindrica* means 'cylindrical or long and rounded'.

As with other close relatives loofah is widely cultivated for its fruit, in Asia especially.

When the fruit are young they are eaten locally like squash (*Cucurbita maxima*) or added to soups and stews. In Malaysia the insipid-tasting young leaves are also prepared as a vegetable and in some areas in Indonesia the flower buds and the flowers provide food too.

The processed mature fruit on the other hand are a valuable export commodity and can be found in bathrooms all over the world, including those in Asia. The bleached, dried fibrous fruit skeleton serves as the ubiquitous loofah (the sponge for scrubbing skin). Japan is the main exporter in this field and is said to produce the best loofahs. She cultivates the vine in fields and trains it over bamboo supports. The loofah has also been put inside boots as an alternative to cork soles and has been used for stuffing pillows and saddles – and in the past they have not only been used as fuel oil filters (particularly in marine engines) but also as shock and sound absorbers in military equipment. Today it is also of growing interest as a packing material which would of course be biodegradable.

Medicinally, the leaf juice provides a Javanese remedy for some period problems and is prescribed in India to cause vomiting as an antidote for snake bites. In Malaysia over-ripe fruit offer a purgative.