

Moringa oleifera

[Synonyms : *Moringa moringa*, *Moringa pterygosperma*, *Moringa zeylanica*]

HORSERADISH TREE is a deciduous succulent tree. Native to north-western India and the Mediterranean it has small fragrant, creamy-white flowers.

It is also known as *Behennussbaum* (German), Behen oil, Ben nut tree, Ben oil, *Ben oléifère* (French), Ben tree, Drumsticks, *Kalúngai* (Filipino/Tagalog), *Kelor* (Javanese, Sundanese), Maidenhair tree, *Marum* (Thai), *Meerrettichbaum* (German), *Merunggai* (Malay), *Merunggai kelor* (Malay), Moringa, *Morunga* (Tamil), *Mulaga* (Telugu), *Munga* (Telugu), *Mungna* (Hindi), *Murunga* (Singhalese), *Murunga-kai* (Tamil), Oil of ben tree, *Pferderettich* (German), *Sajna* (Bengali), *Sakhta* (Malayalam), *Shakta* (Malayalam), *Soanjna* (Hindi, Punjabi), *Sobhanjana* (Sanskrit), *Suhunjna* (Bengali, Hindi), and *Zoliv* (Creole).

Oil called Oil of Ben is extracted from the seeds, known as Ben nuts, and this provides an alternative to sperm whale oil.

Warning – the root and the freshly crushed leaves may cause diarrhoea if taken internally, and externally they may cause irritation.

Oleifera is derived from Latin *olei* (oil, olive oil) and *-fer* (bearing, carrying) components meaning ‘oil-bearing’.

Some authorities note that the ancient Egyptians could have been the first to appreciate some of horseradish tree’s attributes. It was an ingredient in their solidified perfume with which they scented their bodies, and it was also burnt as incense.

Leaves, flower buds and flowers are all eaten locally, as well as the unripe fruit pods that are cooked in a hotly-spiced vegetable dish. (In southern India bridegrooms eat the fruit pods which are respected as an aphrodisiac.) The seeds are eaten fried. The root has offered an alternative food seasoning to true horseradish, *A Armoracia rusticana*. (The twigs, leaves, flowers and pods have also been used as flavouring but are less pungent.)

The seeds are used to clear muddy water. (They have a coagulating property and it is said that one crushed seed can clarify 90% of a specific bacteria from a litre of river water in twenty minutes.)

The seed oil is used as a fixative in perfumes, and is a commercial ingredient in cosmetics and hair lotions. It is also used in manufacturing soap and is burnt for illumination too. In addition Ben oil has been used by watchmakers and still can be today. On the other hand the oil was used in the past for lubricating machinery as well but has been completely overtaken by alternatives. As it is edible this oil is used in cookery, particularly in the manufacture of salad oil.

The cake remaining after the extraction of seed oil is used as a fertilizer.

Twigs and leaves are harvested for animal fodder.

In northern India the bark is used to treat internal inflammation in cattle.

Medicinally, locally the leaves, bark and root are taken to enhance digestion. Variously they have also been used to treat epilepsy and some nervous disorders. Roots and leaves have provided a treatment for beriberi and some skin disorders as well. (In northern India a decoction of the root is used to counter the effects of scorpion bites.)