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Mucuna pruriens

[Synonyms : *Carpopogon pruriens*, *Dolichos pruriens*, *Mucuna aterrima*, *Mucuna cochinchinensis*, *Mucuna deeringiana*, *Mucuna esquirolii*, *Mucuna nivea*, *Mucuna prurita*, *Mucuna utilis*, *Stizolobium aterrimum*, *Stizolobium deeringianum*, *Stizolobium pruriens*, *Stizolobium prurimum*]

COWHAGE is an evergreen, annual or perennial climbing vine. Native to tropical Asia (particularly India) it has small pea-like, bluish-purple flowers.

It is also known as *Alkusa* (Bengali), *Atmagupta* (Sanskrit), Bengal bean, Buffalo bean, Couhage, Cowage, Cowhage, Cowitch, *Dulagondi* (Telugu), Florida velvet bean, French bean, Horse-eye bean, Itch plant, *Jackfasel* (German), *Kawanch* (Hindi, Punjabi), Kiwach, Mauritius bean, *Pois à gratter* (French), *Punaikkali* (Tamil), *Pwa grate* (Creole), *Shoriyanam* (Malayalam), *Stechende Echtesfasel* (German), and Velvet bean.

Warning – hairs on the pod can cause extreme skin irritation so the pods must be handled with care. Strong medicinal doses of the hairs can cause enteritis and ultimately death. Some believe the seeds to be poisonous (with possible hallucinogenic properties).

Pruriens is derived from Latin *prurio* (to itch) meaning ‘causing an itch’ with reference to the skin irritation caused by the pod’s hairs.

The mottled seeds are believed to resemble a horse’s eye hence the name horse-eye bean.

In some parts of Africa the uncomfortable fruit pods used to be rubbed on young children’s skin when they were being taught to control urination.

The barbed hairs on the fruit pods have provided an ingredient used in times past in south-eastern Asia for criminal poisoning ie. murder.

Tender young pods have been cooked and eaten in India and the boiled seeds have in the past attracted a name as an aphrodisiac.

Medicinally, the fruit pod hairs mixed in syrup, honey or molasses have been used to treat some types of worm (although it is said that this remedy has little effect on tapeworm). The root has also been used to treat catarrh and fluid retention, and in infusion has offered a cure in some parts of India for cholera. Medical research in the West has led to the isolation of a drug used in the treatment of Parkinson’s disease.

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