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Physostigma venenosum

CALABAR BEAN is an evergreen twining, climbing perennial. Native to the west coast of Africa (particularly Benin, the United Republic of Cameroon, Nigeria and Togo), it has small pea-like, pinkish-purple flowers.

It is also known as *Calabarböna* (Swedish), Chop nut, Esere nut, and Ordeal bean.

Warning – an extremely poisonous plant (particularly the seeds which can affect the central nervous system). It can cause violent vomiting, violent purging, slowed pulse, increased blood pressure, muscular weakness, paralysis of the lower limbs and rapid death.

Venenosum is derived from Latin *venenum* (poison) meaning ‘very poisonous’.

An area of south-eastern Nigeria near Port Harcourt is known as the Calabar and there locally the nut is called *Esere*. The name Ordeal bean arose from its use in African trials by ordeal. The powdered bean had to be drunk and, if swallowed quickly, would cause violent vomiting and purging which got rid of most of the poison but if it was sipped it would be absorbed rapidly and cause death (in some cases within one hour).

Today the plant is rare in the wild as any that were known were destroyed under the instructions of the national authorities.

It was introduced into Europe in 1840 (in 1846 it was planted in the Edinburgh Botanic Gardens) and subsequently used to treat tetanus, rheumatism, epilepsy and cholera. The plant has few uses now in western medicine except ophthalmology for which it is used to contract the pupil in the eye and in the treatment of some eye disorders.