

Strychnos nux-vomica

[Synonyms : *Lignum-colubrinum timorense*, *Strychnos ligustrina*, *Strychnos nux-vomica* var. *oligosperma*, *Strychnos rheedel*, *Strychnos spireana*]

NUX-VOMICA is a deciduous or evergreen tree. Native to southern Asia (particularly India and Burma, the latter known as Myanmar today) it has many small unpleasant-smelling, greenish-white flowers.

It is also known as *Brechnussbaum* (German), False angostura bark, *Goda-kaduru* (Singhalese), *Kaffir* (Afrikaans), *Kanchurai* (Tamil), *Kanniram* (Malayalam), *Ka yular* (Indonesian), *Kuchila* (Punjabi), *Kuchla* (Hindi), Kuchla of India, *Kulčiba dávivá* (Czech), *Mushti* (Telugu), Poison nut, Quaker buttons, *Rävkaketräd* (Swedish), Snakewood, *Strikno vomnuksa* (Esperanto), *Strychninbaum* (German), Strychnine, Strychnine tree, *Vishamushti* (Sanskrit), Vomit nuts, *Yetti* (Tamil), and *Zerkochla* (Gujarati).

The seeds are a source of strychnine.

Warning – the seeds are extremely poisonous. They can cause extreme convulsions (which can lead to ‘risus sardonicus’ ie. a fixed grin) paralysis, arrested breathing and death. In Britain it is a prescription only medicine.

Nux-vomica is derived from Latin *nux* (nut) and *vomitus* (vomit, vomiting) components with reference to the purging properties of the fruit.

Locally the seeds (they yield an oil) have been used for poisoning animals and for committing murder. The seeds also yield a brown dye. They have been used locally in spirits to increase the potency of the drink.

Nux-vomica was unknown to the ancient civilizations in the Mediterranean region eg. the Egyptians, the Greeks and the Romans, and apparently there is no old name for it in Sanskrit. The Arabs eventually came across it (no doubt through their trading activities) and it is believed that *nux-vomica* was first heard of in Europe in the 16th Century. It is also believed that it was only introduced to west Africa in the late 1920s.

In Europe the seeds were used at first primarily as rat poison. This emphasis was set to change however and their use for human medicine became dominant.

Chemists first isolated the drug strychnine in 1818.

The durable, moderately hard and heavy, smooth, yellow-white wood has been used for making tool handles.

Nux-vomica was introduced to Western medicine in 1640 and in this capacity it was used for the treatment of indigestion and constipation, as well as a cardiac tonic. Today it can also be used for treating nervous disorders and paralysis.