



PLANT FACT SHEET



Poisonous

This plant, or parts of it, can be poisonous. Do not eat it unless you know which parts are safe and how they must be prepared.

Food Plants International: Seeds (POISONOUS)

Abrus precatorius L.

GENUS *Abrus* FAMILY Fabaceae

COMMON NAMES Bird's eye, Indian liquorice

EDIBLE PARTS AND USES

Edible parts: Seeds, Roots, Leaves, Flowers

CAUTION Seeds are very poisonous. They contain a poison called abrin. If chewed they can cause blindness and death.

Roots are reported to be eaten in India. They are boiled and eaten in the Andaman Islands. They are a substitute for liquorice. The seeds have been recorded as eaten in Egypt and India after very long cooking. The leaves have been recorded as being used to make tea drinks in Australia. The very young leaves are cooked and eaten in Nepal when other food is scarce. The dry leaves are chewed with the leaves used with betel nut. The pods are recorded as roasted and eaten in the Andaman Islands.

DESCRIPTION

A climbing vine. It can grow up to 10 m long. The vine can be 1.5 cm thick. The branches are shaped like a rod with small lateral branchlets. The leaves are 5 to 10 cm long and usually smooth underneath. There are 20 to 40 pairs of leaflets. The leaves are like a feather. The leaflets are dull green and much paler beneath and fall off seasonally. The leaflets are 1-2 cm long by 0.3-0.6 cm wide. The flowers stalks are shorter than the leaves. Many flowers are produced on a stalk and they are pinkish white to purple. The pods are oblong and 4-5 cm long. The pods are slightly woody and flattened. They are smooth. They contain 3 to 5 shiny seeds which are bright red with a black spot. The seeds are retained on the pod some time after the pod splits open. The seeds have a very hard coat so are not easily chewed even though they are poisonous. (The poisonous substance must get into the blood stream.)

HABITAT

It is a tropical plant. It will grow on most soils but often occurs in sandy positions. It suits areas with a high rainfall and does best in sunny positions. It is damaged by drought and frost. They are widely distributed in areas of shrub throughout the Philippines. In Papua New Guinea it grows near mangroves. In Papua New Guinea they

grow up to 660 m altitude. In Africa it grows up to 1,350 m above sea level. It needs a temperature above 16°C. It can grow in arid places.

PRODUCTION

Cultivation

It is grown from seed. The seed needs to be treated to break the dormancy. Putting them in boiling water can do this. Plants can also be grown from cuttings.

Harvesting and Seed Production

Plants flower in January to April in the southern hemisphere. The fruit develops from December to August. The young leaves are picked off.

NOTES

There are about 26 *Abrus* species. The seeds are very poisonous. The roots, leaves and seeds have been used medicinally. It can become an invasive plant. The roots and leaves contain glycyrrhizine that is in liquorice.

PICTURES



Credit: Food Plants International (Bruce French)



Credit: Food Plants International (Bruce French)



Credit: Food Plants International (Bruce French)

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