

CERASEE – A POPULAR PLANT IN JAMAICAN FOLK MEDICINE

Cerasee (*Momordica charantia*) has been used traditionally in Jamaican folk medicine for centuries. It has a variety of uses and has been credited as a purgative medicinal herb with powers of healing, particularly ailments associated with the skin, blood, and bowels.

This creeping herb plant, (from the cucumber and pumpkin family), grows abundantly on fences, hedgerows, and on the ground from sea level to 1,200m. Its climbing vine bears a fruit which splits when it ripens to reveal seeds in a red, fleshy covering which attracts animal pollinators. Its bright yellow flowers and orange fruits are found all over the vine. It bears fruits and blossoms all year round but, moreso, during rainy periods. The fruits can be eaten and are very sweet when ripe.

The tendrilled vines grow at a rapid rate and have brittle stems and lobed leaves, all of which release a bitterly pungent odour when crushed. The leaves can be boiled – ½ oz. to a pint of boiling water - and drunk as a laxative and as a blood cleanser. It can also be used very hot to reduce toothaches and for mouth infections. The leaves produce a bitter taste but, notwithstanding, are often used in folk medicine as a tea to cure a many illnesses, including colds and fevers. It is also popularly used for complaints connected with the belly, such as stomach ache, constipation, birth control, and to assist mothers after childbirth. However, it is not recommended that cerasee tea be incorporated regularly in the diet as this practice is known to cause liver damage. The rural folk in Jamaica take it orally for nine days only, sporadically, when necessary.

The young parts of the plant are also useful. They produce a green, bitter, frothy solution when soaked and pulped in water. This solution is commonly used as a bath for skin eruptions and pimples and can be applied topically on the skin as a lotion. It is also excellent for acne of the face.

The plant is so ingrained in traditional Jamaican folk culture that a folk song 'Elena' has been dedicated to it. In the song, cerasee is recommended as a cure for bellyache:

Elena and har muma go a ground.

Elena start bawl fi har belly.

Go home, Elena! Go home, Elena!

Go boil cerasee fi yu belly.

*Di muma she get some cerasee,
 And boil it an give to Elena.
 Elena go a bed and she sleep, and she sleep,
 And wake up without pain a belly.*

ACTIVITY

FILL-IN-THE-BLANKS COMPREHENSION TEST

Read the passage above and the questions below, then unscramble the words and fill in the blanks with the correct answers.

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|-------------|---|
| ranchaita | The scientific name for cerasee is Momordica _____ . |
| burcuecm | Cerasee is from the _____ and pumpkin family. |
| tsrplloniao | The orange fruit of the cerasee plant attracts animal _____. |
| ahcsethoot | Boiled cerasee leaves can be used to reduce _____ . |
| llbye | Cerasee is popularly used for complaints of the _____ |
| rlvie | Regular use of cerasee in the diet can cause _____ damage. |
| ksni | Cerasee is commonly used as a bath for _____ eruptions. |
| Eanle | In the folk song _____, cerasee is recommended as a cure for bellyache. |

Correct answers: charantia, cucumber, pollinators, toothaches, belly, liver, skin, Elena .



The cerasee plant with flower (Source: Natural History Museum of Jamaica)



The cerasee plant with fruit (Source: Natural History Museum of Jamaica)

The Words of the Right Excellent Marcus Mosiah Garvey

“All peoples are struggling to blast a way through the industrial monopoly of races and nations, but the Negro as a whole has failed to grasp its true significance and seems to delight in filling only that place created for him by the white man.”

Source: The Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey. Compiled by Amy Jacques Garvey. Published by Frank Cass and Company Limited (1983), London, England.