

# CASTOR BEAN PLANT

“Castor Oil” “Oil Nut”

**Scientific Name:** *Ricinus communis* L.

**Plant Family:** Euphorbiaceae

**Description:** Plants usually 2-5 m tall; leaf- blades from 10 to 100 cm across, the lobes acute and pinnately veined the marginal serrations more or less glandular. Capsules 12-21 mm in diameter; seeds ellipsoid, somewhat flattened, variously mottled, mostly 10-20 mm long.

## **Chemical Classification &/or Active Compounds:**

Seeds contain the highly poisonous phytotoxin ricin. Heat inactivates the ricin (a protein) contained in the seeds.

**Note:** The seeds must never be swallowed. 5-6 will kill a child, 10 will kill an adult.

**Habitat:** Old fields, roadsides, open waste ground, gardens.

## **Traditional Uses:**

Seeds and leaves have been used since ancient times as a purgative and emollient. For pain, headaches, sinus congestion, fevers, vaginal tract infections and post childbirth pains, a hair conditioner.

Castor oil was an excellent purgative for children and elderly people. It acts fairly quickly - within eight hours-producing soft stools and no griping.

The leaves can be applied to the size of a boil as a poultice. Leaves can be used on body to extract heat. Seed when dry can be crushed in the mortar then boiled until the oil floats, skim off, fry out water, store in bottles. Use one Tablespoon as a laxative or if necessary two. Can be used to rub behind the ears and nostrils when heated.

## **Memory Bank & Oral History:**

One of the most popular and revered plants in the Caymans was the Castor Oil Plant.

Mr. Cromwell Ebanks of the Hut, North Side, remembered getting a lashing once when he destroyed a castor oil plant. The bush medicines were respected as much as any natural resource

“The castor oil nut, or simply ‘oil nut’ was a purgative and tasted terrible,” he said, “ but few youngsters escaped getting a dose at least once.”

“A lot of people had coughs and you got a dose of castor oil. Castor oil was our chief medicine.” (There was no doctor in West Bay when Nesta Ebanks was young.)

Nesta Ebanks, West Bay

"They used to give you castor oil for a cold. That'd run it out. It taste bad! (laughter)  
And you had no hair they would take that and mix it, and usually on the head then they  
would get plenty hair.

For pain in the ear..take cotton, wet it [with castor oil] and hold it over the lap and warm  
it and put it in there. And that be cure for the pain ear.

If they get anything in their eye..they would drop a drop in the eye and that would been  
good for it..the castor oil.

They were high trees, and take the castor nuts and you pound them, and boil them.  
Skim the oil off the top. Colour is pale yellow. They keep, they don't spoil."

Joselyn Rankin, East End

"The most, the best medicine we used to use was the castor oil homemade. We had  
plenty trees around and my grandmother always used to collect them and do the  
castor oil. Well, you could drink it or you could rub with it. We were always rub you and  
get a piece of flannelet and put to your chest and things like that, and sometimes that  
would help broke it.

[My mother] she collect them, you know they grows in little pods and she broke them  
out and get the seed. And then what you call a mortar, she put it in that and pound it til  
it become like, you know that it had a body to it like I would say..then she take that and  
put it in a container and wash it round and strain it out to get all the pieces out of it from  
the seed. Then she would set it down overnight in the container and then next day they  
would skim that off and then put it in the pot and fry it down, and that would become the  
oil. She had to put water into it and skim it and then settle it, then that would come like  
a body to it as well, and then put that in the pot and fry it down to oil. She used to do a  
lot of it 'cause she could sell it."

Stella Louise Welcome, East End

Post partum - "A washout - by three days time [after the birth] she used to give them  
what you call a washout. Castor oil, and then she would give them some kind of bush  
tea."

Neatha Conolly, East End

"We used to grow the castor oil seed. When it is young it has a green berry then it  
develops into a dark berry when it is fit, and if you don't pick it, it will pop out and you  
have trouble finding the seeds.

The time to pick it is when they start to get dark. All of the seeds didn't get dark at one  
time, but when you would see a couple of the seeds dark, you would pick the whole  
bunch. Some bunches used to be about pretty near eight inches long. They were good  
big bunches. You would put that bunch in a bag and keep it outside so that the sun  
could finish developing the rest of the seeds. You would put it in a paper bag, or cloth  
bag or a pan. When the seeds got dry, we used to take a piece of stick or a piece of  
board and knock it and all, and plenty of seed would plop out. Some you would  
perhaps have to pop out with your finger. Seeds were black and shiny.