



Cancer Bush

(*Lessertia frutescens*)

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Scientific name: *Sutherlandia frutescens/Lessertia frutescens*

Common names: Sutherlandia, cancer bush, balloon pea (English); umwele, unwele (isiXhosa and isiZulu); kankerbossie, blaasbossie, blaasertjie, gansie, gansiekeurtjie, klappers, hoenderbelletjie (Afrikaans), phetola, mokakana (Setswana), lerumo-lamadi (North-Sotho), musa-pelo, mot-lepelo (Sesotho)

Family: Fabaceae (pea and bean or pod-bearing)

Background

Cancer bush originates in southern Africa and it is distributed widely in South Africa, Botswana and Namibia. In South Africa, the plant is found in the Northern Cape, Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Western Cape and Mpumalanga provinces.

Description

Cancer bush is a hardy, perennial shrub that can grow up to 3 m tall and it is an attractive garden plant.

The leaves

The leaves are slightly to densely hairy and silvery in appearance. They have a very bitter taste.

The flowers

The plant has bright, scarlet flowers of up to 35 mm long. They usually flower from July to December.

The fruit

The fruit is large.

Seed

The seeds are black and 3 mm in diameter.

Climate And Soil Requirements

Cancer bush grows almost everywhere, however, it prefers full sun, well-drained soils and a location receiving substantial moisture. The optimum day temperature should be about 25 °C. It prefers a soil pH of 7,6 to 8,1 and is susceptible to winter freezing (frost).

Uses

Cancer bush is used as an immune booster in the treatment of HIV/Aids, as a medicine in the treatment of chicken pox, internal cancers, colds, 'flu, asthma, TB, bronchitis, rheumatism, rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis, liver problems, haemorrhoids, piles, bladder and uterus problem, diarrhoea, dysentery, stomach ailments, heartburn, peptic ulcers, backache, diabetes, varicose veins and inflammation. It is also used in the treatment of mental and emotional stress, including irritability, anxiety and depression and it could aid digestion and

improve the appetite.

Cultural Practices

Planting

Planting can be done in spring and autumn. Seeds should be sown 1 m apart in groups of three to five.

Propagation

Cancer bush plants are propagated from seed and cuttings, although cuttings are difficult to grow.

Fertilisation

The soil mixture should contain two parts sand and one part compost.

Irrigation

The seeds should receive moderate irrigation, e.g. every second day for a week before it is reduced gradually until establishment of the plant.

Weed Control

Mulching or compost around the plants suppresses weeds competing with the young plants.

Disease Control

Damping off and rot disease could lead to damage to the plants. Control measures that should be taken, are:

- sanitation – destroy affected plants
- avoiding overwatering; and
- recommended registered fungicides can be applied after sowing.

Pest Control

There are no known pests that damage cancer bush plants.

Harvesting Methods

Cancer bush can be harvested in spring to early summer, preferably in the morning. The leaves can be harvested 3 months after planting and the seeds can be harvested as soon as desiccation of the balloon-like pods occurs (papery state). The entire plant is harvested, using manual or mechanical cutting. The papery skins can be harvested by tearing them.

Acknowledgement

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