

Balsam-apple, *Momordica charantia* L.¹

David W. Hall, Vernon V. Vandiver, and Brent A. Sellers²

Classification

Common Name: Balsam-apple

Scientific Name: *Momordica charantia* L.

Family: Cucurbitaceae, Cucumber Family

Seedling

The stem is ridged and has small hairs (Figure 1). The first leaves are heart-shaped and unlobed with broad teeth along the margins.



Figure 1. Seedling, Balsam-apple, *Momordica charantia* L.

Mature Plant

Balsam-apple is an annual with a creeping or climbing stem (Figure 2). The alternate leaves have petioles 3-6 cm long, and thin blades. Leaf blades are hairy to smooth, deeply palmately five- to seven-lobed and up to 12 cm wide. The lobes of the blades are rounded to pointed and usually have teeth on the margins. The flowers usually occur singly on stalks bearing a modified leaf near the middle. The sepals (outermost flower parts) are oval and to 4.5 mm long. The yellow petals are rounded or indented at the tips and up to 1 cm long. The fruit is broadly egg shaped, beaked, bumpy, ribbed, to 10 cm long and golden yellow to bright orange. At maturity the fruit breaks, bursting open along the 3 valves. The orange pulp contains bright red arils which enclose the seeds. The seeds are elliptic, flat, and 9-12 mm long.

History

Momordica is a Latin word that means "to bite" and refers to the look of the uneven seeds. The species name *charantia* is unclear as to meaning but could be Latin and refer to the pointed fruit.

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 2. David W. Hall, former extension botanist, Herbarium, Florida Museum of Natural History; Vernon V. Vandiver, associate professor emeritus, Agronomy Department; Brent A. Sellers, assistant professor, Agronomy Department, Range Cattle Research and Education Center--Ona, FL; Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville FL 32611.

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Figure 2. Mature plant, Balsam-apple, *Momordica charantia* L.

Habitat

This weed is found in hammocks, disturbed sites, turf and ornamental landscapes, and citrus groves from Florida to Texas on the coastal plain, in the West Indies, Tropical America and Old World Tropics.

Biology

The outer fruit coat, ripe fruits and seeds are toxic when eaten in large quantities. When ingested, symptoms may include headache, nausea, salivation, vomiting, diarrhea, muscle weakness, pupil dilation, and facial redness.