

Horseradish Tree — *Moringa oleifera* L.¹

James M. Stephens²

While the horseradish tree (either *M. oleifera* or *M. pterygosperma*) is not a true vegetable by definition, its parts are used as a vegetable. The name derives from the roots, which taste like horseradish and are used as a substitute. It is also known as ben tree and coatli (Mexico).

CULTURE

The horseradish tree comes from eastern India, but is widely grown as an ornamental in many tropical countries. It is sometimes planted in southern Florida (from Tampa to Cocoa and south), where it is easily propagated from cuttings.

USE

The flowers, shoots, and foliage are edible as 'greens.' Cattle are particularly fond of them. Young pods are cooked in curries. Seeds, which taste like peanuts when fried, are eaten, but they contain an alkaloid, which limits their use.

The unripe pods, known as 'susumber' or 'drumsticks,' are cut up and boiled like beans. They are available in tins from delicatessens. The outsides of the pods are extremely hard and woody and impossible to eat; one has to pick them open and eat the mucilaginous inside and 'pips' that are lightly hot and delicious.

Upon pressing, the seeds yield an oil called ben oil. This nondrying oil is used for oiling machinery and watches, in

salad oil, and in soaps. The corky bark yields a gum used in India to print calico.

DESCRIPTION

The deciduous, dry-land, 25 foot tall tree is sometimes mistaken for a legume. It has drooping branches with alternate, fern-like leaves, 9-24 inches long having many oval leaflets, each less than 1 inch long. The 1 inch wide, white fragrant flowers are borne in loose clusters in the leaf axils. The pods are narrow, round, pointed, and reach up to 18 inches long.

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