

Jatropha curcas

Euphorbiaceae

Tropical America

COMMON NAMES: **English:** Physic nut, Purging nut; **Kamba:** Kyaiki kyakyeni, Kya muunyi; **Luo:** Jok.

DESCRIPTION: An erect, stiffly branched succulent shrub or small tree 3–4 m. **BARK:** Thin and yellow-grey with a papery peel; an unpleasant milky sap when cut. **LEAVES:** Alternate and simple with 3–5 shallow lobes, to 15 cm long, widely rounded at the base on a stalk to 16 cm. **FLOWERS:** Small, yellow-green, shortly stalked on branched heads with a shorter stalk than the leaves. **FRUIT:** Ovoid capsules, slightly 3-angled 2.5–4 cm long, black when ripe, containing 3 mottled seeds. When crushed the seeds produce a yellow oil.

ECOLOGY: One of more than 150 *Jatropha* species, mainly occurring in tropical America and Africa. This species was introduced to Africa centuries ago and is now naturalized in drier areas in many countries. A decorative plant frequently planted as a live fence around homesteads or used as a boundary or grave marker. Also naturalized in bushland and along rivers in the western, central and coastal parts of Kenya, 0–1,650 m. Agroclimatic Zones II–III.

USES: Medicine (roots, seeds), live fence, boundary marking, ornamental.

PROPAGATION: Seedlings, cuttings.

SEED: Collect when capsules split open. About 2,400 seeds per kg; germination rate 70–100%.

treatment: None.

storage: Seeds are oily and do not store for long. Use fresh seed.

MANAGEMENT: Fast growing; pruning, trimming as a fence.

REMARKS: The name *Jatropha* comes from 2 Greek words meaning physician and food. The oil has purgative properties and seeds are poisonous. Even the remains from pressed seeds can be fatal. The plant has been used to make candles and soaps. A recent trial plantation at Malindi was defoliated by beetles and produced very little fruit.

FURTHER READING: <http://www.worldagroforestrycentre.org/Sites/TreeDBS/AFT/AFT.htm>; Beentje, 1994; Katende et al., 1995; Kokwaro, 1993; Löttschert and Beese, 1983; Palgrave and Palgrave, 2002.

