

Ricinus communis

Euphorbiaceae

Africa

English: Castor oil plant
Nyanja: Sasi, mono, tsatsi
Senga: Mono
Tumbuka: Mono

Ecology: First cultivated for its oil in ancient Egypt and now widely naturalized throughout the tropics. It is a weedy shrub or tree growing in dry country or on disturbed ground, 0–2,700 m. It can also be a commercial oil crop which is suited to all soils, even soil which may be seasonally waterlogged, including heavy clay. There are many forms and varieties, including attractive garden specimens, but only one species. In Katete District, it is commonly used for live fencing.

Uses: **Medicine** (seed oil), soil conservation, fertilizer (seed cake), **live fence**. The oil has many uses as a lubricant and in the chemical industry.

Description: An evergreen shrub or tree usually to 5 m. **LEAVES:** **compound palmate** to 50 cm across, on long stalks (5–11 lobes), the edge toothed, tips pointed. **FLOWERS:** crowded on an **upright spike** to 60 cm, male flowers with cream-yellow stamens at the base of the spike; female flowers with bright red stigmas, on the upper part of the spike. **FRUIT:** rounded to 2.5 cm across, covered with soft green spines; when mature, the **brown capsule** breaks into 3 sections to set free **3 large seeds**, coloured grey-purple-brown, spotted, depending on the variety.

Propagation: Seedlings, direct seeding, wildings, cuttings.

Seed: Susceptible to insect damage. No. of seeds per kg: 1,300. Germination is good; about 90% after 3 weeks.

treatment: Not necessary.

storage: Use fresh seeds. Can retain viability up to one year.

Management: Pruning.

Remarks: The plant is drought- and termite-resistant. The castor oil plant is promoted as a cash crop in Zambia. The oil is exported for use as a fine lubricant. The seed coat and leaves are poisonous to animals and poultry and even the oil residue can only be used as stock feed if specially treated. It can, however, be used as a fertilizer. The seeds yield up to 50% oil and this useful oil has even been used to lubricate aeroplanes. The oil extract is heated to neutralize the strong poison, ricin. Even a few seeds can kill if they are chewed—so take care with children. The oil is locally used as a body lotion.

