

***Ricinus communis* L.**
Euphorbiaceae



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■ Morphological description

Ricinus communis is a perennial remarkable for the size of its leaves and its majestic appearance. It is a shrub or small tree that can grow to 2-4 m., branched, completely glabrous, a glaucous green with yellow parts that are often reddish. The leaves are simple, alternate, downy and with a long petiole bearing shield-like epidermic glands. The limb is palmate-lobed, divided into 7-9 lanceolated, irregularly toothed, glandulous lobes.

The flowers are apetalous, set in several groups to form a wide-paniced inflorescence. The male flowers are found at the base of the bunch; their stamens are undefined, with many pollen loculi, and they hang together in very ramified bushes. The female flowers, set at the top of the bunch, have three red, lengthwise bifid styles.

The fruit is a 2-3 cm. capsule composed of three prickly shells; each loculus contains a shiny seed about the size of a haricot bean, with a caruncle, covered with a very hard yellow/brown marbled integument.

Flowering occurs between March and June.

■ Geographical distribution

Local: A species that was introduced and naturalised in all of Tunisia.

Regional: A species that was introduced and naturalised in North Africa.

Global: A cosmopolitan species, originally from the east (India) and tropical Africa. It is naturalised all over the Mediterranean.

***Ricinus communis* L.** Sp. Pl.: 1007. 1753

Arabic: kharouâa

French: ricin commun

English: castor oil plant

■ Ecology

Ricinus communis is a xenophyte taxon, a cultivated plant that does not grow wild. It develops on rubble, at waysides, near places where people live and in wadi beds.

■ Status, conservation and culture

Ricinus communis is naturalised in Tunisia; it is picked wild. It is thought to be toxic.

■ Part used

The leaves, seeds and oil.

■ Constituents

The seed contains a little water, 15-20% proteins, 40-60% lipids and ricin, a toxic substance.

■ Traditional medicine

For cold and mild respiratory problems: soak the fresh leaves in olive oil and put on the thorax (especially for children and new-born babies). For abortion: eating a seed of *Ricinus communis* will bring on an abortion. As a contraceptive: eating a seed of *Ricinus communis* will inhibit a woman's gestation for a year.

■ Pharmacological action and toxicity

The castor oil plant is antitumoral; the minimum lethal dose is about 0.4 milligrammes per kilo given parenterally in rats. Poisoning from the seed leads to nausea, headache, diarrhoea with blood, dehydration, ECG changes, necrosis of the liver, loss of consciousness, etc. The oil is laxative and purgative.

■ Use in herbal medicine

Oil from the castor oil plant seeds is laxative and purgative.

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