

# *Abrus precatorius* L.



**Common Name:** Rosary pea, crab's eyes, precatory pea, licorice vine

**Synonymy:** *A. abrus* (L.) W. F. Wight

**Origin:** India, and perhaps other parts of tropical Asia

**Botanical Description:** High-climbing, twining, or trailing woody vine with slender herbaceous branches. Leaves alternate, petioled, 5-13 cm (2-5 in) long, even-pinnately compound with 5-15 pairs of leaflets, these oval to oblong, to 1.8 cm (< 1 in) long, with margins entire. Flowers shaped like pea flowers, white to pink or reddish, small, in short-stalked, dense clusters at leaf axils. Fruit a flat, oblong pod, splitting before falling to reveal 3-8 shiny hard seeds, 6-7 mm (< 1 in) long, scarlet with black bases.

**Ecological Significance:** Introduced to Florida for ornament before 1932 (Morton 1976). Noted as abundantly naturalized by Small (1933), Lakela and Craighead (1965), Long and Lakela (1971), Morton (1976), Austin (1978), Wunderlin (1982), and Isely (1990). Described by an early Florida horticulturist as quickly "taking full possession" of a young forest and impossible to remove even after several years of effort (Morton 1976). Has invaded undisturbed pinelands and hammocks, including the globally imperiled pine rocklands of Miami-Dade County (M. McMahon, Biological and Environmental Consulting, personal observation). Classified as an invasive weed in India, the Caribbean Islands, Belize, West

Polynesia, and Hawaii (Holm et al. 1979, Wester 1992). Widely introduced and "has run wild in most warm climates" (Morton 1971b). Seeds used as beads in many countries (Isely 1990). Seeds extremely poisonous for humans, cattle, and horses—one ingested seed may prove fatal (Morton 1971b, Isely 1990).

**Distribution:** Now pantropical (Isely 1990). In Florida, documented as invading xeric hammock, coastal berms, coastal strands, maritime hammocks, shell mounds, upland glades, mesic flatwoods, hydric hammocks, and ruderal communities. Documented by herbarium specimens from 28 counties as far north as Alachua County centrally, Volusia County on the east coast, and Hernando County on the west coast, south through the peninsula to Miami-Dade and Monroe counties, including the Keys (Wunderlin and Hansen 2004).

**Life History:** Roots deeply and tenaciously, difficult to eradicate (R. Moyroud, Mesozoic Landscapes, 1995 pers. comm.). Increases in population size following fire (Maithani et al. 1986). Flowers in summer, fruiting prolifically. Seeds dispersed by birds (Austin 1998a). Has been investigated for various types of usable extracts, such as for insecticides (e.g., Khanna et al. 1989), antifertility drugs (e.g., Sinha 1990), other medicines (e.g., Wambebe and Amosun 1984), and sweetening agents (Jakimovich et al. 1990).