Rhynchosia hirta (Andr.) Meikle & Verdc.

**Family:** Fabaceae  
**Common names:** blue-seeded snoutbean, hairy snoutbean (Eng.); imbeleksani, iyezalesisu (Xho.)

A lovely indigenous vine with attractive blue seeds; an alternative to gardeners over exotics.
**Description**

*Rhynchosia hirta* is a vigorously twining or climbing herbaceous, sometimes woody plant, of various sizes, but reaching heights of 2–8 m. Stems are densely covered with short brownish hairs when young. These hairs fall off as the plant matures. Leaves are trifoliolate (with three leaflets), broadly elliptic to ovate, with simple margins, sparsely hairy above densely covered with reddish brown hairs beneath.

Flowering stalk is occasionally branched, with 7–many flowers. Flowers vary from greenish cream-coloured, to yellow striped with red; through orange to pink with red or purple venation that sometimes give them a reddish appearance. Flowers from late winter throughout spring to summer (July–March).
The 2-seeded pods (fruit) are narrowly oblong, densely covered in short, velvety grey or rusty-brown hairs. Pods open twist upon seed maturity, exposing the glossy dark-blue seeds that remain attached to the pods.

**Conservation Status**

*Rhynchosia hirta* has a wide distribution and is commonly found. Its status is, therefore, considered Least Concern (L)

**Distribution and habitat**

*Rhynchosia hirta* occurs in far northwestern parts of South Africa, from KwaZulu-Natal through to Mpumalanga and Limpopo Provinces. It further spreads northwards into East and Central Africa and westwards into Cameroon, northern Nigeria and Ivory Coast, and further east to the Mascarene Islands, India and Sri Lanka. It grows in sandy soil in grassy outcrops, open woodlands, forest margins and occasionally on termite mounds. In Zimbabwe, it is recorded to in *Brachystegia* woodlands. In South Africa, *Rhynchosia hirta* grows at altitudes of 150–1 800 m.

**Derivation of name and historical aspects**

The genus name *Rhynchosia* is derived from a Greek word *rhyncos*, meaning ‘beak’, referring to the beaked pod of species in the genus, for example those of *Rhynchosia caribaea* and many others. The keel (the 2 often partially unit lowest petals that conceal the sexual parts of the flower) of the flowers is also beaked. The specific name *hirta*, meaning ‘hairy’, referring to the hairiness of the plant (stems, leaves, calyces and fruits).

The genus was first described in 1790 by Loureiro for the inclusion of *R. volubilis* and since then, more than 235 species have been described of which 73 occur in southern Africa.

**Ecology**

*Rhynchosia hirta* is very hairy, and for this reason it is said to be unpalatable to grazing animals and preying insects; however, birds such as guinea-fowl and francolin eat the seeds in Kenya.

**Uses**

*Rhynchosia hirta* is an important medicinal plant, especially in Tanzania, where it is used an ecbolic (in childbirths) and puerperium disorders. Roots are used as a famine food. The stem is used in agri-horticulture for fodder and also as
or string. Leaves are used as a tonic, as well as in stomach disorders. In the southern peninsula of India seeds are used food by the local people in the Udayagiri Forest of the Nellore District, Andhra Pradesh State. The Zingua locals in Tí use the seed pods as rattles, as well as decorating children toys.

**Growing Rhynchosia hirta**

It is a fast grower in the natural habitat. When cultivating this plant from seeds, 90% germination can be achieved, by sowing scarified seeds (chipped with scalpel), imbibed on 1% agar germination medium for 70 days at 30/15°C (there meaning, seed sown in the light for 8 hours at 30°C, and in the dark for 16 hours at 15°C). The plant can be best use the gardens as a decorative climber along fences. The plant tolerates light shade, but flowers better in full sun.

**References**


Thulisile P. Jaca
National Herbarium
April 2018

**Plant Attributes:**

**Plant Type:** Climber

**SA Distribution:** KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga

**Soil type:** Sandy, Loam

**Flowering season:** Autumn, Winter

**PH:** Acid, Neutral

**Flower colour:** Green, Red, Pink, Cream, Yellow

**Aspect:** Full Sun, Shade, Morning Sun (Semi Shade), Afternoon Sun (Semi Shade)

**Gardening skill:** Average

**Special Features:**
Attracts birds
Hedge/screen
Edible plant
Medical plant
Useful plant

Horticultural zones

Zone 1 Coastal summer rainfall, frost free
Zone 5 Bushveld summer rainfall, Light frost

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