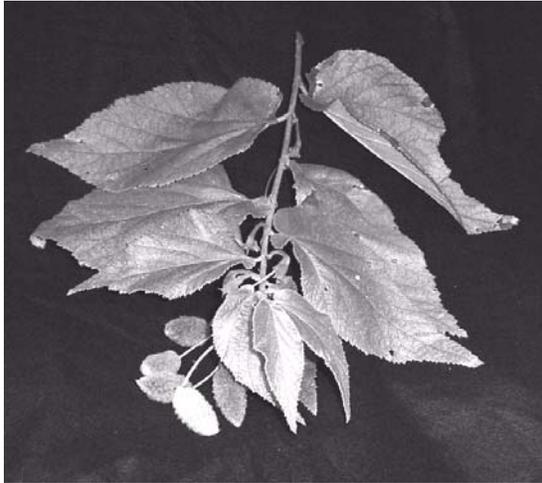


*Helicteres jamaicensis* Jacq.  
STERCULIACEAE

cowbush

Synonym: *Helicteres spiralis* Northop



**General Description.**—Cowbush is a shrub or sometimes a small tree 7 m in height and up to 20 cm in basal diameter. It is also known as cowitch, blind-eye-tree, salzbush, wild salve, screwtree, jeucon, cottonrat, cuernecillo, gato sogá, huevo de gato, gato, majagüilla de costa, and tapaculo (Little and others 1974). The shrub has a dense covering of soft hairs throughout. The trunk is gray with conspicuous warts. A somewhat swollen taproot with abundant laterals and fines form the root system. The tan-colored roots are somewhat stiff and woody. There is usually a single stem unless the plant has been damaged. It develops relatively few long, stout, spreading or drooping branches. The alternate leaves have short petioles and ovate to ovate-lanceolate blades with toothed edges. Flowers are few and form in groups of one to three at leaf bases. They have five white petals. The fruit consists of five gray-green hairy carpels that twist upon themselves to form an ellipse about 2 to 4.5 cm long. The seeds are blackish and about 1 mm in diameter (Liogier 1994, Little and others 1974).

**Range.**—About 40 tree or shrub species of *Helicteres* are found in tropical America and Asia (Griffiths 1994). Cowbush is native to the Bahamas, the Greater Antilles, the Virgin Islands, and St. Martin (Little and others 1974). Planting or naturalization in other areas has not been reported.

**Ecology.**—Cowbush grows on soils of all textures

that are derived from sedimentary, igneous, and metamorphic rocks, including ultramafics. In Puerto Rico, it grows between sea level and 400 m elevation and in areas that receive between about 700 and 1700 mm of annual precipitation. Well-drained soils are required. The species competes well with herbs and shrubs in early and middle secondary forest. It grows on roadsides, in openings, and in low and open forest canopies, but not under closed canopies. Some degree of disturbance appears to be necessary to perpetuate the species. It is common in many partially forested rangelands, but disappears under severe overgrazing or frequent fires.

**Reproduction.**—Cowbush flowers irregularly through the year. The fruits in a Puerto Rican collection averaged 1.436 g/fruit and contained an average of 152 seeds/fruit. The seeds weighed an average of 0.0032 g/seed or 312,000 seeds/kg. The carpels of the fruits open at the ends to gradually release the seeds as the fruits shake in the wind. To collect small quantities, tear the fruits apart and pick out the seeds or cut off the ends of the fruits and tap them to release most of the seeds. Larger quantities can be obtained by pulverizing the fruits and winnowing the seed. Seeds from the Puerto Rican collection were sown in commercial potting mix and germinated (99 percent) between 11 and 22 days after sowing. Germination is epigeal. Natural seedlings are usually common wherever a seed source is present. However, few progress past the small seedling stage.

**Growth and Management.**—Growth is relatively rapid after the early seedling stage, but the shrubs are not long-lived (5 to 15 years). The use of containerized seedlings for plantations is recommended.

**Benefits.**—Cowbush is occasionally planted as an ornamental. It is attractive as a large foliage or background plant and makes an interesting curiosity plant. It has been planted in revegetation projects (Reforesta 2001). The wood of the species is yellow, hard and heavy, but not available in sizes sufficient to be used for anything other than fuel. The fibrous bark is strong and was once used for making rope (Little and others 1974). Cowbush

is reported to have several uses in herbal medicine. A tea made from the wood and leaves is used to treat bilious conditions and as an emetic. A decoction of those same tissues is good for fever and cough, and the cooked root is able to stop bleeding (Liogier 1990). The hairs of the species are reported to cause serious irritation (Jamaicans 2001), but this is not reported by Little and others (1974) and was found to be untrue by the author, at least for Puerto Rican plants.

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