

59. *BOWIEA VOLUBILIS* Harv. (LILIACEAE) — Climbing Onion, Zulu Potato

Poisonous plant, probably with medical potential. It has been estimated that the tuber has 30 times the intensity of activity of digitalis, the flowers 60 times. A German patent has been issued for a glucosidal preparation for human cardiac use.³ Grown in greenhouses as curiosities with their twining aphyllous stems and large exposed bulbs.³⁶ Zulu males use the tuber to prepare a love attractant.³

Reported to be cardiotoxic, poison, purgative, the climbing onion is a folk remedy for constipation, dropsy, and infertility.³³ Transvaal Africans use the tuber decoction as a collyrium. Zulu use a hot water infusion of the outer leaves of the bulbs for ascites.³

Contains three highly active cardiac glycosides, bovocides A, B, and C, all about as toxic as ouabain. As much as 10% sinistrin is reported. Nabigenin, isolated from the bulb, is a mixture largely composed of scilliglaucosidin; hellebrigenin is also reported. Other complex compounds and their derivatives occur.^{3,33}

Toxicity — African medicine men have killed their patients with overdoses of the bulbs. Vomiting and purging were followed by death in 3 hours to 3 days. However, death may occur in a matter of minutes.³