



*Scelletium tortuosum* flowers



*Scelletium tortuosum* plant



Traditional product

**DESCRIPTION** *Scelletium* is a short-lived perennial succulent plant with creeping stems and overlapping pairs of leaves that have glistening, crystal-like water cells on their surfaces. The leaves become "skeletonised" when they dry out – the persistent leaf veins remain on the plant – hence the generic name *Scelletium*. Pale to bright yellow or orange-yellow flowers are borne along the branch tips, followed by pale brown, papery capsules containing numerous small, reddish brown, kidney-shaped seeds. There are eight species of *Scelletium*, but only *S. tortuosum* is well known and used in commercial products.

**ORIGIN** South Africa (southwestern parts of the Cape and Namaqualand). Selected strains with a high alkaloid content are grown commercially on a small scale in South Africa.

**PARTS USED** Dried whole plant.

**THERAPEUTIC CATEGORY** Hypnotic, sedative.

**USES AND PROPERTIES** The plant is used to elevate mood and to counteract anxiety, stress and tension. Numerous traditional uses have been recorded, including relief of hunger and thirst, treatment of colic

in infants and as replacement therapy for alcoholics.

**PREPARATION AND DOSAGE** The fermented and dried herb is traditionally chewed (hence the Afrikaans name *kougoed*, literally meaning "chewing stuff"). It can also be used as a tea, decoction and tincture. A dose of 100-200 mg of the dried, powdered herb is included in tablets and capsules (about 1-4 mg of alkaloid) and taken two or three times a day.

**ACTIVE INGREDIENTS** *Scelletium* contains mesembrine-type alkaloids (mesembrine, mesembrenone, mesembrenol, tortuosamine and others) at concentrations ranging from 0.05-2.3% of the dry product. Mesembrine is usually the main ingredient in leaves.

**PHARMACOLOGICAL EFFECTS** Mesembrine is a potent serotonin-uptake inhibitor and the other alkaloids appear to be active at other neuroreceptors. An interesting feature of this unique plant is the apparent absence of physical and psychological dependency, even after many years of habitual use. No adverse side effects have been recorded. High doses may cause euphoria but the plant is not hallucinogenic.

**STATUS** Traditional medicine.

*Scelletium tortuosum* (L.) N.E. Br.

*kanna* (Khoi); *kougoed* (Afrikaans); *sceletium* (French); *Scelletium* (German); *sceletium* (Italian)

family: Mesembryanthemaceae