

# Cape aloe

## Aloe ferox

### Bitter aloe



Aloe ferox, commonly known as bitter aloe, is a species of flowering plant in the family Asphodelaceae. This woody aloe is indigenous to southern Africa. It is one of several Aloe species used to make bitter aloes, a purgative medication, and also yields a non-bitter gel that can be used in cosmetics.

Aloe ferox is a tall, single-stemmed aloe, that can grow to 10 feet (3.0 m) in height. Its leaves are thick and fleshy, arranged in rosettes, and have reddish-brown spines on the margins with smaller spines on the upper and lower surfaces. The leaf surfaces of young plants are covered in spines; however, as they get taller and less vulnerable to grazing, the leaves begin to lose most of their spines except for those along the leaf margins. Plants in the western part of its natural range tend to keep more of their leaf surface spines.

Its flowers are a uniform orange or red, and stand between 2 and 4 feet (0.61 and 1.22 m) above the leaves, in multi-branched inflorescences.

It is a variable species, and plants may differ physically from area to area, due to local conditions. This aloe is frequently confused with the related *Aloe excelsa* species, to the north, and they do look very similar when fully grown. However the flowers are different, with the racemes of *Aloe excelsa* being far shorter and slightly curved.



Altogether, the bitter aloe can be distinguished from its closest relatives: by its more compact, erect leaves with 6mm reddish-brown teeth on the margins and also on the keel of the leaf near the leaf tip; by their erect candelabra inflorescences, which bear up to eight very dense, cylindrical, symmetrical, 50–80 cm racemes; and by their un-curved, tubular flowers with brown inner segment tips

### Uses

The bitter aloe is most famous for its medicinal qualities. In parts of South Africa, the bitter yellow juice found just below the skin has been harvested as a renewable resource for two hundred years. The hard, black, resinous product is known as Cape aloes or aloe lump and is used mainly for its laxative properties but is also taken for arthritis.

"Schwedenbitters" which is found in many pharmacies contains bitter aloe. The gel-like flesh from the inside of the leaves is used in cosmetic products and is reported to have wound-healing properties.