

Pappea capensis Eckl. & Zeyh.

Family: Sapindaceae (litchi or soap-berry family)

Common names: jacket plum, Indaba tree, bushveld cherry (Eng.); doppruim (Afr.); umQhokwane, umVuna, iNdaba (Zulu); iliTye, umGqalutye (Xhosa); mongatane, Mopsinyugane (Northern Sotho); liLetsa (Swati); Xikwakwaxu, Gulaswimbi (Tsonga)



The red fruit of this tree is a tasty treat for humans and a firm favourite with birds and animals. A fine oil is extracted from the seeds. The jacket plum is related to the litchi and is a natural addition for the bird or wildlife garden. It is easily cultivated, although slow-growing in colder climates.

Description

The jacket plum is a long-lived, hardy, evergreen, small to medium tree with a height of 2-8 m. Under ideal conditions it can grow at a moderate rate but can be slow-growing under dry and/or cold conditions.

The leaves are simple and oblong, hard-textured and wavy. The leaf margin may vary from sharply toothed (especially in young growth) to almost smooth in mature growth. The greenish flowers are borne on catkins in the axils of the leaves, followed by round green velvety fruits which split open to reveal bright red flesh with a dark brown to black seed imbedded within.



Distribution

Pappea capensis is widespread in southern Africa from the Northern Cape through the drier Karoo, Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, to the northern provinces, as well as Mozambique, Zimbabwe and northwards into eastern and southern tropical Africa. It naturally occurs in bushveld, riverine thicket, wooded grassland and rocky outcrops in grassland as well as scrub veld and is often found on termite mounds. Due to its wide distribution range it is well suited to cultivation in a wide variety of climatic conditions.

Derivation of name and historical aspects

The generic name *Pappea* is named after a German physician and plant collector Carl Pappe, while the specific name *capensis* refers to southern Africa. *Pappea capensis* belongs to the same family as the popular fruit, the litchi. The family is represented in South Africa most notably by the false currants (*Allophylus* spp.), the well-known and widely cultivated sand olive (*Dodonaea viscosa*) and the bushveld red-balloon (*Erythrophysa transvaalensis*).

This species was previously known as two separate varieties (*Pappea capensis* var. *capensis* and *P. capensis* var. *radlkoferii*). However, it is now widely accepted that it was just regional variation which resulted in confusion between an arid form from drier areas and a more lush form from regions of higher rainfall.

Ecology

The fruit is eaten by various frugivorous birds and animals which in turn distribute the seeds in their droppings. The leaves are browsed by game such as elephant, giraffe, kudu, nyala, bushbuck, and grey duiker as well as domestic stock animals.

The jacket plum has also been recorded as the larval food plant to the caterpillars of the following butterflies of southern Africa:

Common hairtail butterfly (*Anthene definita definita*)

Brown playboy butterfly (*Virachola antalus*)

Pearlspotted charaxes (*Charaxes jahlusa*)

Gold-banded forester (*Euphaedra neophron*)

The sweetly scented flowers attract a wide variety of insects which in turn attract many birds. The seed is parasitized by a small, bright red bug (*Leptocoris hexophtalma*) which sucks the oil from the seed on the ground below the tree.

Uses and cultural aspects

The delicious and very juicy fruit with a tart flavour is used to make preserve, jelly, vinegar and an alcoholic drink.

Fragrant non-drying golden yellow oil is extracted from the roasted seeds. There are reports of it being used for oiling rifles. It is also used as a purgative and for lubrication, as a cure for ringworm, to restore hair, as well as for making soap.

Leaves, bark and the oil extracted from the seed are used medicinally against baldness, ringworm, nosebleeds, chest complaints, eye infections, and venereal disease. Bark is also used in protective charms that are sprinkled on the ground. Some research has reported that the leaves are very effective in killing snails. Infusions of the bark are also used by Kenyan Masai warriors to gain courage as well as an aphrodisiac and a blood-strengthening tonic. The root is used orally or as an enema and as a purgative for cattle.

Lobengula's Indaba tree, which stands in the state house in Bulawayo in Zimbabwe, is an

ancient specimen of *Pappea capensis*.

The wood is hard, light brown with a reddish tint, tough and heavy with a twisted grain. There is apparently little difference between the heartwood and the sapwood. The stems seldom attain significant girth and therefore do not yield much useable wood. It is,



however, used to make sticks, poles, cattle yokes, furniture and kitchen utensils. This tree is still used as an important source of traditional medicine today

The new leaves are an attractive pinky-bronze when they emerge in spring, this contrasts well with the dark green of the old leaves making an attractive display.

The trees flower from September to May (southern hemisphere) and the rather special fruit is produced from December to July. The dense crown is popular with nesting birds as it provides a concealed and sheltered nesting sites.

Nursery-grown plants adapt well to cultivation and respond well to organic and synthetic horticultural fertilizers. Saplings are slow-growing especially when young but growth increases as the tree matures. Growth is also considerably quicker in warmer climates or warmer positions of the garden.