

The bark is a popular traditional medicine. It is used to treat acne and eczema, and is usually applied in the form of facial saunas and skin washes. It is used by people with 'bad blood' that results in pimples on the face. Powdered burnt bark is used to treat sprains and bone fractures. In some parts of Eastern Cape, root decoctions are traditionally taken for paralysis thought to have been contracted from walking over an area that has been poisoned or polluted through sorcery.

Other utilisation

The wood of the *H. caffrum* is pale reddish and fairly heavy. It polishes well but is not very durable. It has been used as a general purpose timber, for furniture and beams. It is also used for carving curios. The bark is also used as a dye, and it gives a mauve or pink colour.

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Wild Plum



agriculture,
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Department:
Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Scientific name: Harpephyllum caffrum

Common names: Sour Plum, Wildepruim, Mothêkêlê, umGwenya, Mmedibibi, Umgwenyobomvu

Family: Anacardiaceae

Origin and distribution

Wild plum is native to Southern Africa, with a distribution extending from the Eastern Cape, through KwaZulu-Natal and into Swaziland, southern Mozambique, Mpumalanga and Limpopo. The tree is usually found in riverine forests hence occurs mainly in coastal forest of Eastern Cape province of South Africa.

Production areas in South Africa

The tree is enlisted no. 361, among the declared rare trees in South Africa and was among the trees of the year 2008 for Arbor Week. Wild plum is found growing naturally in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga and Limpopo.

Description of the plant

Mature plant

The wild plum tree is a large, evergreen tree that grows up to 15 m tall. Branches are curved bowed upwards, with leaves crowded towards their ends, forming a thick crown at the top of the tree. The tree develops a thick rounded crown, making it a good shade tree. It is one of the largest trees found in the sub-tropical forests of KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumalanga but somewhat smaller in the drier Eastern Cape areas.



Stem

The main stem is clean and straight, but the forest form

often has supporting buttress roots. The bark is smooth when young, becoming rough, dark grey-brown as it grows older.

Leaves

The shiny dark green and glossy leaves are pinnate with sickle-shaped leaflets, and are sometimes interspersed with the odd red leaves. The wild plum leaves are crowded towards the end of the branches.

Flowers

The whitish green flowers are borne near the ends of the branches with male and female flowers on separate trees, throughout summer (November to February).



Fruit

The tasty plum-like fruits first appear green and then turn red when they ripen in autumn; they contain a single seed and are enjoyed by people, mammals and birds.

CLIMATE AND SOIL REQUIREMENTS

Temperature

Wild plum prefers a warm climate with a sunny habitat, but can tolerate some shade. It is sensitive to frost and grows well in forests that have a dry season minimum temperature of about 6° C to a maximum temperature of 35° C.

Rainfall

The tree is drought tolerant and only requires a moderate amount of water. It grows in semi-arid areas with rainfall from as low as 600 mm.

Soil requirements

It usually prefers habitats with sandy soil or rocky terrain. The tree is found growing singly in well-drained soil in forest area.

Cultural practices

Propagation

H. caffrum grows easily from seeds. Stored seeds should be soaked in water for a day and then be scrubbed with a brush to remove the fleshy part. It must then be sown in trays filled with river sand or a normal potting soil. They should be planted at about 10 to 15 cm, too deeper can result in dormancy and rot. The seeds take 7 to 11 days to germinate.

The wild plum can also be propagated by means of cuttings and truncheons. The truncheons should be dried before planting; they can be left lying in the shade for a day or until all exudate has dried. The hole in which the truncheon is going to be planted should be filled with a layer of river sand to promote root formation and improve drainage. This also helps to combat fungal diseases.

Fertilisation

No information has been recorded on application of fertilisers to wild plum tree.

Rainfall

Rainfall is the main means of irrigation to the tree. Artificial method has not been recorded for irrigating wild plum.

Insects and pests control

Larvae of the common hairtail butterfly (Anthene definite) and the Eggar moth (Lasiocampa kollikerii) feed on leaves of this tree.

Uses and cultural aspects

The fruit of H. caffrum is widely eaten by birds, animals, insects and utilised by humans. They are commonly used for making jams and jellies. With their sour taste, they are also good to make rose wine. The tree has some potential as a commercial crop, but a preliminary trial planting in the Negev Desert in Israel was reported as disappointing.

The tree is an attractive evergreen tree that is useful as an ornamental garden, shade and street tree.