

Filicium decipiens

Sapindaceae

Indigenous

COMMON NAMES: **English:** Thika fern leaf, Fern tree; **Kikuyu:** Kamiti.

DESCRIPTION: A graceful evergreen to semi-deciduous tree 6–10 m tall with a rounded, often dense crown. **BARK:** Grey, smooth, becoming dark brown, rough and cracking with age. **LEAVES:** Compound, to 30 cm long, the middle stalk (rachis) with wing-like protrusions, the wing to 1 cm wide; leaflets about 3–10 pairs, each leaflet narrowly elliptic, to 14 x 2 cm, tip rounded and notched, glossy dark green above, with scattered resin dots, lighter in young leaves. **FLOWERS:** Very small, white, in branched heads about 15 cm long, arising from the sides of branches. **FRUIT:** Elongated, to 11 mm long, purple-black when ripe, fleshy.

ECOLOGY: Distributed in southern India and from Ethiopia south to South Africa, including Madagascar and the Comoros. In Kenya found in riverine forests or swampy sites in forest in Central Province and northern Rift Valley. Also occurring in moist montane forest and in hilltop forests of the coastal belt, e.g. Taita Hills; 1,050–1,700 m. Planted widely in Nairobi and surrounding towns as an ornamental. Agroclimatic Zones II–III. Seeds available in December–January around Nairobi.

USES: Firewood, shade, ornamental, wood for making small implements.

PROPAGATION: Seedlings, wildings. In Nairobi, tree nursery workers take the ripe black fruit, and clean off the fruit pulp. The clean seed should not be dried. These are sown in fertile soil in a large polythene pot, watered and covered with grass. Germination takes 2–3 weeks. Seedlings should be planted at sites with fertile soil.

SEED:

treatment: Not necessary.

storage: Stores for only a very short period.

MANAGEMENT: Growth is slow during early stages but faster later. Prune lower branches to give the tree a good shape.

REMARKS: This tree has gained great popularity as an ornamental plant in recent years. Its beauty is derived from its dense glossy compound leaves with a remotely palm-like appearance, hence the misnomer 'Thika palm'. *Filicium* is a small genus of no more than 3 species.

FURTHER READING: Beentje, 1994; Dharani, 2002; Noad and Birnie, 1989; Palgrave and Palgrave, 2002.

