

Ormocarpum kirkii

Fabaceae (Papilionaceae)

Indigenous

COMMON NAMES: **Boni:** Mpotscho ndovu; **Boran:** Butiye; **Digo:** Chitadzi, Mkitaji; **Giriama:** Mkitaji, Kitwadzi; **Kamba:** Muthingii, Muema nzou; **Maasai:** Enkike empan, Engese mbaus; **Sanya:** Gur kolu; **Somali:** Lebi sauwer; **Swahili:** Mkitaji.

DESCRIPTION: A shrub or small tree 2–9 m. **BARK:** Rough and grey. Young twigs with a few white hairs. **LEAVES:** Usually clustered on short side shoots with 7–13 pairs of leaflets plus a terminal leaflet, each oblong, about 1 cm, wider at the tip, which has a sharp point, the edge tightly rolled under, darker above than below, leaflets well spaced along the stalk with some hairs. **FLOWERS:** Large, pink, deep mauve in the centre, pea-shaped, towards the ends of branches, 1–3 together on short stalks, the standard petal about 1.5 cm long, wider across, ovary and stalk densely hairy, corolla remains around the fruit. **FRUIT:** A very small pod, barely 2 cm, hairy, curled into a ring within the brown petals; rarely maturing due to insect attack, so often there is only one perfect seed.

ECOLOGY: Found from the horn of Africa south to Mozambique, and the northern part of South Africa and Namibia. In Kenya, mainly found in the eastern dry lowlands of the country and coastal region. Very common in Machakos, Kitui, Makueni, Kajiado, Taita-Taveta and Kwale Districts in dry bushland. Agroclimatic Zones IV–VI. Flowers in May in Machakos District.

USES: Firewood, light construction, medicine (roots, ash after burning, leaves), fodder (goats, camels), walking sticks, ornamental.

PROPAGATION: Normally coppices very well, so natural regeneration may be sufficient in sites where the plant exists.

SEED: Seeds germinate easily, wildings.

REMARKS: The bush or tree is covered with very many large, beautiful mauve flowers at certain seasons. *Ormocarpum* in Kenya is represented by about 6 species. Three others are common: *O. trichocarpum*, *O. trachycarpum* and *O. keniense*.

O. trichocarpum (**Boran:** Butiye; **Gabra:** Butiye; **Kipsigis:** Koipeyot ap tirita; **Luo:** Otamo liech, Det; **Maasai:** Enkike empan, Engese mbaus; **Pokot:** Makaran; **Samburu:** Lekweita; **Turkana:** Eseperai) is similar to *O. kirkii* but has a fruit without a persistent flower and 4–7 leaflets 2–3.5 mm long. The fruit has long stiff hairs to 7 mm long. It is mainly found in the moist lowlands of western Kenya, including the Lake Victoria basin.

O. trachycarpum (**Boni:** Mpotscho ndovu; **Boran:** Butiye; **Digo:** Chitadzi, Mkitaji; **Gabra:** Butiye; **Giriama:** Mkitaji, Kitwadzi; **Kamba:** Muthingii, Muema nzou; **Kipsigis:** Koipeyot ap tirita; **Luo:** Otamo liech, Det; **Maasai:** Enkike empan, Engese mbaus; **Pokot:** Makaran; **Samburu:** Lekweita; **Sanya:** Gur kolu; **Somali:** Lebi sauwer; **Swahili:** Mkitaji) is similar to the above species but has 9–17 leaflets per leaf, and a persistent flower. Unlike *O. kirkii*, the fruit protrudes beyond the flower remains and is straight.

O. keniense resembles *O. kirkii* in that the fruit is small, to 1.5 cm, and hidden within the flower but generally has more (11–19) but smaller leaflets (to 2 x 8 mm). It is more common in dry bushland. *Ormocarpum* was heavily used in refugee camps in north-eastern Kenya, for example at Dadaab, to meet needs for firewood and small-size building and fencing material. The genus as a whole has about 20 members found in the Old World.

FURTHER READING: Beentje, 1994; Bein et al., 1996; Blundell, 1987; Kokwaro, 1993; Palgrave and Palgrave, 2002; Ruffo et al., 2002.

