

LOCAL NAMES

Afrikaans (kaffer kofie, datelboom, wildedadelpalm, wildedadelboom); Amharic (selen, zembaba); Arabic (wakhale); Bemba (kanchindu, lunchindu); English (Senegal palm, mukindu palm, wild date palm, feather palm, false date palm, coffee palm); French (palmier-dattier sauvage); Lozi (mukapakapa, nzalu, chisonga); Luganda (lukindu, mukindu); Lunda (chisonga); Nyanja (kanchinda); Somali (alol); Swahili (mkindu); Tigrigna (aguseana); Zulu (iSundu)

BOTANIC DESCRIPTION

Phoenix reclinata may reach a height of 10-12 m. Stem about 25 cm in diameter, may be straight or curved; sometimes swollen at the base, with a dense mass of pencil-thick roots arising from the lower part. Tree may grow as a stemless suckering bush or with short multiple stems. Bark smooth, black, slightly marked by concentric rings of leaf scars.

Crown consists of 15-30 live leaves, 10-20 dead and dying ones. Live leaves erect; dead ones hang downwards. Leaves evergreen, pinnate, feather shaped, 3-4 m long, consisting of 100-200 leaflets growing in 2 ranks; leaflets sessile (without stalks), folded, to 30 cm in length, glossy, dark green, long and narrow, with sharp points. The lower 30-50 leaflets very pointed, spinelike, arranged in pairs, the lowest being about 3 cm long.

Small, cream-coloured, stalkless flowers in 20-cm wavy spikes; surrounded by a bright yellow case that opens to let the flowers droop out. Borne in axils of young leaves. Calyx of male flowers cup shaped with 3 petals, 6 stamens, all joined at the base; ovary vestigial, forming large, showy sprays and producing clouds of dustlike pollen; female flowers globose, insignificant, have a calyx as in male, 3 petals, rounded ovary with 3 free carpels, 6 vestigial stamens.

Fruits borne in large, drooping bunches, individual fruit oval, orange to reddish- or yellow-brown, up to 2.5 cm long, fleshy, datelike with a rather insipid but edible flesh.

Closely related to the true date palm, *P. dactylifera*. 'Phoenix' is the Greek word for date palm; it is a very old name used by Theophrastus and indicates that the tree was 1st introduced to the Greeks by the Phoenicians. The specific name, 'reclinata', is Latin, meaning 'bent backwards', and refers to the leaves.

BIOLOGY

In *P. reclinata* there is an increased flow of sap to the flower heads just before the flowering season. Male and female flowers are normally on different trees. In Zambia, they are produced between September and November, and fruits mature 6 months later. In southern Africa, flowering occurs from August to October, and fruiting from February to April. Fruit is eaten by birds and elephants, which also disperse the seeds.



Phoenix reclinata tree on ICRAF Campus, Nairobi, Kenya. (AFT team)



Phoenix reclinata (Patrick maundu)



Xhosa lady in traditional dress with home made household utensils made from the wild date palm - a hand broom made from the fibres of the stem and baskets made from the leaves. (Ellis RP)

ECOLOGY

P. reclinata is a clump-forming palm; it may be solitary but is usually found growing in colonies. Grows throughout tropical Africa in humid lowland woodlands, highland forests and on open, rocky hillsides. Occasionally it grows in grasslands with a high water table. Throughout Zambia the species is essentially a swamp or riverine species and is found in considerable concentrations around Lake Bangweulu. It is also found around anthills, on boggy dambos, in munga woodland on the Kafue Flats and in the Kalahari woodland. Outside Zambia its range extends from Senegal across West Africa to Ethiopia, and over the whole of eastern and central Africa to Botswana and the Cape. *P. reclinata* is drought resistant and prefers full sun but also thrives in light shade. It is a protected species in South Africa.

BIOPHYSICAL LIMITS

Altitude: 0-3 000 m, Mean annual rainfall: 500-1 500 mm

DOCUMENTED SPECIES DISTRIBUTION

Native: Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe

Exotic:



The map above shows countries where the species has been planted. It does neither suggest that the species can be planted in every ecological zone within that country, nor that the species can not be planted in other countries than those depicted. Since some tree species are invasive, you need to follow biosafety procedures that apply to your planting site.

PRODUCTS

Food: Buds may be eaten raw or cooked as a vegetable. The heart of the crown is eaten, and the fruit is also edible.

Fodder: Leaves are eaten by elephants, and the fruit is food for many wild animals.

Fuel: Wood is suitable for production of charcoal.

Fibre: Mats, rope, baskets and string can be made from the fibres of young, unexpanded leaves in immature palms, while the midribs of mature leaves are used to make baskets and roofing material. Fibres from the stem are made into brushes and brooms, and in the Cape region of South Africa, leaves are used in making the kilts of Xhosa boys taking part in initiation ceremonies.

Timber: The wood, which is resistant to white ants and fungi, is used for hut building, making doors, windows and fence posts.

Gum or resin: Roots of *P. reclinata* yield a gum.

Tannin or dyestuff: Leaves yield a useful dye, and roots contain tannin.

Alcohol: A palm wine can be brewed from the fermented sap obtained from trees.

Medicine: Parts of the tree are used as a remedy for pleurisy.

Other uses: Dried inflorescences are used as brooms to sweep areas around dwellings.

SERVICES

Erosion control: The tree can be employed in the conservation of soil.

Ornamental: This palm can be very effective if planted as a specimen tree on a lawn, to line the sides of a road or to fill a large opening in a large garden.

TREE MANAGEMENT

Well-grown trees are graceful, especially when pruned to a single stem. If plants are growing in groups, thinning is recommended, and during harvesting some leaves should be left on the tree.

GERMPLASM MANAGEMENT

Seed storage behaviour is orthodox, and they store well. There are about 900-5000 seeds/kg.

PESTS AND DISEASES

Larvae of the butterfly, *Zophopetes dysmephilai*, feed on the leaves of trees.

FURTHER READNG

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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