

***Dombeya rotundifolia***

## Sterculiaceae

**Indigenous**

**COMMON NAMES:** **English:** Dombeya; **Kamba:** Mutoo, Muvau; **Kikuyu:** Mutoo; **Luhya (Bukusu):** Kumukusa; **Maasai:** Olmotoo, Ilmotoo (plural), Olawuo; **Pokot:** Megerswa; **Sabaot:** Borowa; **Taita:** Ndowa; **Tugen:** Porowet; **Turkana:** Ebolis.

**DESCRIPTION:** A deciduous shrub or tree to 8 m, but usually smaller and often flowering when leafless. The crown is light and usually rounded, and the young twigs are reddish and covered with star-shaped hairs that are soon shed. **BARK:** Dark grey to brown, corky and rough. **LEAVES:** Broadly oval to almost circular, 6–18 cm across, base heart-shaped, tip rounded or occasionally sharp, sandpapery above, often very hairy below, edge unevenly toothed. The leaves dry **very crisp and hard**. **FLOWERS:** White-pink in many-flowered heads arising from the sides of branches. Buds are woolly. **FRUIT:** Small, round hairy capsules, pale brown or cream, surrounded by the now brown and dry petals. Contain up to 3 small dark brown seeds.

**ECOLOGY:** A small tree occurring over a wide range of altitudes, usually in wooded or open grassland from Ethiopia south to Namibia, Botswana and the northern part of South Africa. Widely distributed in Kenya, e.g. in Machakos, Kericho, Narok, Kajiado Districts and in the areas around Lake Victoria, in wooded grassland, *Acacia-Themedra* dry grassland, *Combretum-Ozoroa* open woodland and bushed grassland, often in rocky areas; 900–2,200 m. Agroclimatic Zones II–IV.

**USES:** Firewood, timber, poles, tool handles, bows (strong but flexible branches), medicine (roots), fodder (leaves), bee forage, shade, ornamental, mulch, soil conservation and improvement, fibre (young bark).

**PROPAGATION:** Seedlings, wildings.

**SEED:** 35,000–40,000 seeds per kg. Germination is good and completed after 3 weeks.

**treatment:** Not necessary.

**storage:** Can retain viability only for a short period (3 months) at room temperature.

**MANAGEMENT:** Fast growing; lopping, pollarding.

**REMARKS:** The wood makes good fuel, is strong and tough but often twisted. The heartwood is blue-grey, heavy and very durable, but because of its small size its use has largely been limited to bows, tool handles, wagon wheels, planting sticks, etc. The sweet-scented blossom attracts bees and the nectar produces a light amber-coloured honey. An attractive tree for dry areas when in flower.

The related *D. kirkii* (**Boran:** Sililach; **Kamba:** Mutoo, Muvau; **Kikuyu:** Mukeu, Mutheringende; **Kipsigis:** Selebwet; **Luo:** Odhidho; **Maasai:** Olawu) is a shrub or tree to 7 m, common along rivers, forest edges and on rocky areas; 600–2,200m. It is more common in the central and southern part of the country as well as Samburu District. Leaves are heart-shaped, to 9 cm long, somewhat sandpapery above with a serrated edge; flowers creamy white. Fruit hairy. The strong but flexible woody branches of this species are also used by the Kamba and Maasai to make bows. *D. taylorii* (**Boni:** Milanje,

**Merfured; Digo:** Mbwale; **Swahili:** Mbwale; **Taita:** Kidabita) is also a small tree or shrub similar in many respects to *D. kirkii* but strictly coastal. It is found in forest edges, wooded grassland and bushland. The species has similar uses as the others. *Dombeya* is a genus with over 200 species occurring in Africa and the nearby Indian Ocean islands.

**FURTHER READING:** Backes and Ahenda, 1998; Beentje, 1994; Blundell, 1987; Dharani, 2002; Kokwaro, 1993; Mbuya et al., 1994; Noad and Birnie, 1989; Palgrave and Palgrave, 2002; Storrs, 1979; van Wyk, 1993.

