

***Dracaena steudneri*****Dracaenaceae****Indigenous**

**COMMON NAMES:** **English:** Steudner's dragon tree; **Kikuyu:** Muthare; **Luo:** Ofito, Wire; **Meru:** Kithare; **Sabao:** Mololosti; **Somali:** Sasaante; **Swahili:** Msanaka; **Taita:** Issai; **Tugen:** Roke.

**DESCRIPTION:** An evergreen tree, usually 15 m but up to 18 m. The trunk often branches from the base with large branches rising steeply. Near the ground the base may be swollen. **BARK:** Smooth, grey-red-brown, with horizontal leaf scars. **LEAVES:** Dark shiny green crowding the tips of branches like palms, the leaves over 1 m long and 12 cm wide, strongly fibrous, with no clear veins but the centre thickened, the edge wavy. **FLOWERS:** Pale white-yellow-green, 6 narrow petals joined in a tube about 1 cm long, petal lobes as long as the tube. Flowers in tight clusters all over a big flowering head about 1 m high produced at the end of branch. **FRUIT:** Rounded green berries, becoming red then black and juicy, about 1 cm across; eaten by birds. The angular branchlets remain for some time and turn orange.

**ECOLOGY:** A tree distributed from eastern to southern Africa in moist or drier forest. In Kenya, it grows mainly in moist highland forests, 1,250–2,100 m, often in gaps, along river banks or in gallery forest. Common in the Lake Victoria forest belt. Agroclimatic Zones II–III. Mature fruit in December (Nairobi).

**USES:** Poles, medicine (bark), bee forage, shade, ornamental, ceremonial.

**PROPAGATION:** Cuttings, seedlings, wildings. Cuttings root easily.

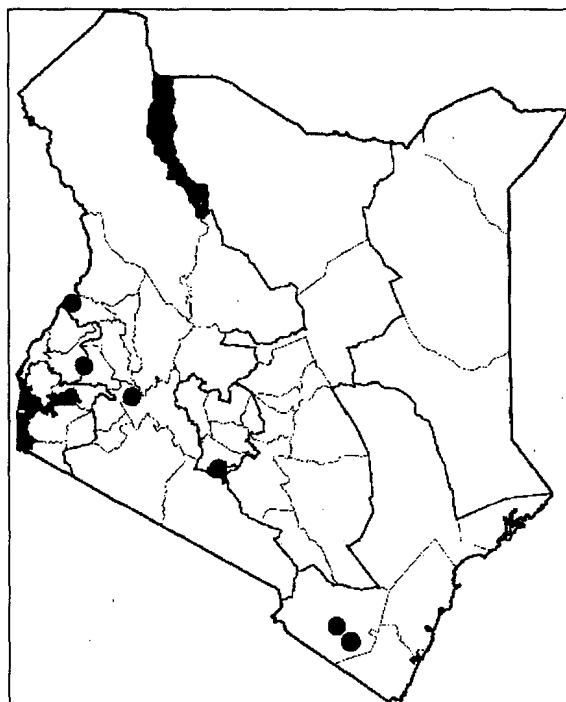
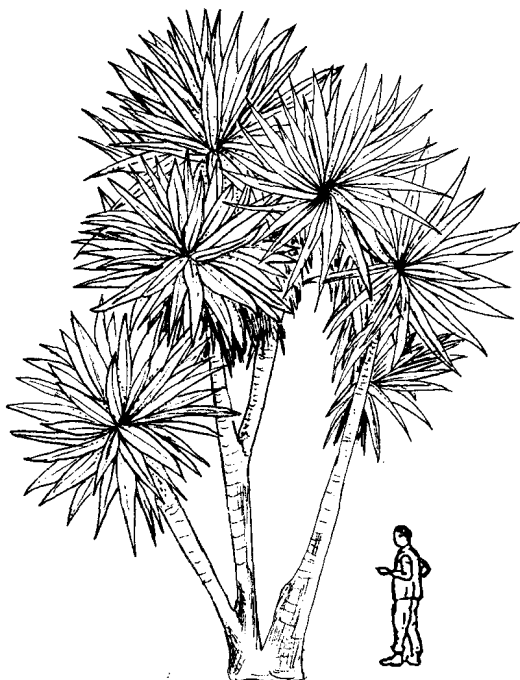
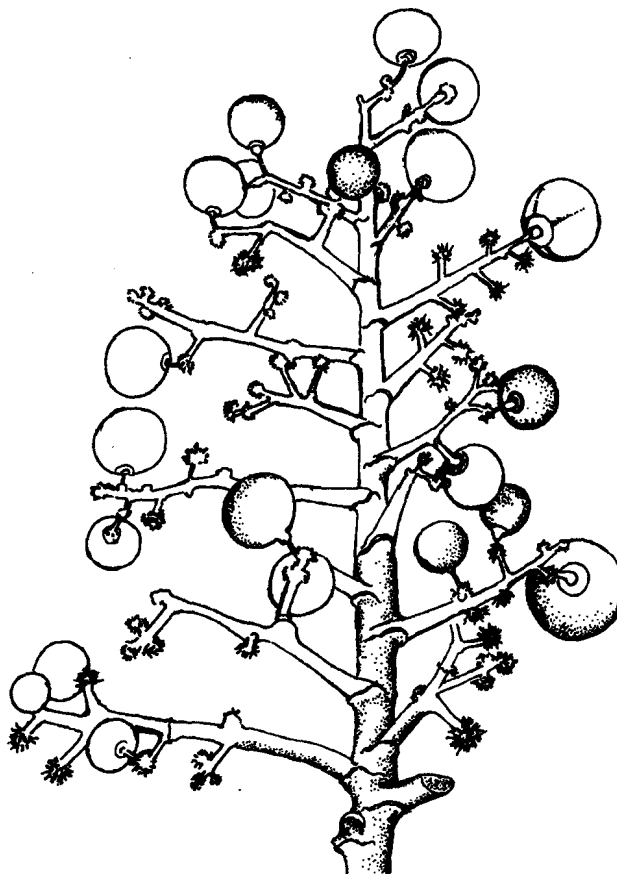
**SEED:** Spread out on a dry cement floor to dry the whole fruit.

**treatment:** Not necessary.

**storage:** Better to use cuttings than to store seed.

**MANAGEMENT:** Fast growing. Little or no management required once established.

**REMARKS:** Where forests are encroached upon, this tree will always be left, and in many instances is the only sign that the area was once forest. There could be as many as 8 species of *Dracaena* in Kenya. A closely related species, *D. afromontana* (**Kikuyu:** Muthari; **Kipsigis:** Labatiet; **Maasai:** Olebenyan; **Nandi:** Lebekuek), is found in moist highland forests up to the bamboo zone. It is a palm-like tree to 7 m distinguished from *D. steudneri* by



***Dracaena steudneri*** (cont)

its thin leaves (less than 2.2 cm wide). Another large palm-like dragon tree is *D. ellenbeckiana* (**Boran:** Butte, Butie; **Gabra:** Butte; **Kipsigis:** Motiet; **Maasai:** Olegidong; **Pokot:** Moronguton; **Samburu:** Nkokidong; **Turkana:** Emith). This species is found in the central and northern part of Rift Valley Province and neighbouring areas on rocky hillsides; 1,000–2,000 m. The hollowed-out stems are used by the Turkana and Pokot for arrow quivers. Another important species is *D. fragrans*, often found as an unbranched shrub or small tree. It bears a large flowering head up to a 1 m long containing white flowers. Fruits are orange, round, to 1.8 cm across. This species is found in western Kenya, particularly in

Kakamega Forest. It is also planted as a hedge and has great cultural significance. *D. laxissima* is common throughout the country in riverine forest. It has weak stems and is often seen supported by other plants. A few other species are found only at the coast. Dracaenas are important ceremonial plants. Many of the smaller types are planted as a hedge, while others are used to mark burial sites. They are good ornamental plants, and others are excellent soil-stabilization agents. The taxonomy of the genus in Kenya is still unsatisfactory.

**FURTHER READING:** Beentje, 1994; Bekele-Tesemma et al., 1993; Dharani, 2002; Fichtl and Adi, 1994; Katende et al., 1995; Kokwaro, 1993; Noad and Birnie, 1989; Palgrave and Palgrave, 2002; Sommerlatte and Sommerlatte, 1990.

