

Lawsonia inermis

Lythraceae



Indigenous

Am: *Hina*

Eng: *Henna*

Ecology

A shrub widely distributed in northern, western and central Africa. It is also cultivated in many parts of the world as an ornamental and source of dye. In Ethiopia, it grows mainly along river courses and in semi-arid areas, for example in the Afar plains, and in Harerge and Bale regions, 0-1,100 m.

Uses

Medicine, dye (leaves), perfumes, thatching, carriers for donkeys, ornamental, fodder (leaves).

Description

A twiggy shrub or small tree to 4 m, with short side shoots often ending in a spine. Young stems with a square cross-section. LEAVES: Small and widest at the middle or slightly above, up to 2 x 4 cm, opposite, shiny, usually tinged reddish brown when young. FLOWERS: White to cream, small, in long branching heads to 30 cm, sweet-scented. FRUIT: Small round reddish-yellow capsules borne in dense clusters, each to 8 mm, with persistent style, splitting into 4 parts. Capsules turning brown as they dry.

Propagation

Seedlings, cuttings.

Seed

100,000–500,000 seeds per kg; germination rate up to 70%. Sow in seedbed and prick out.

Treatment: Not necessary.

Storage:

Management

Slow growing. Coppicing.

Remarks

The plant produces a volatile oil with a pleasant odour. An orange-red dye extracted from leaves and young shoots is used to colour clothes and leather, to decorate nails. Women use it to colour their skin and condition hair (henna). The dye is released by using citric or tartaric acid, lemon juice or tea. The fruit and flowers attract birds, and antelope and livestock browse the leafy branches. The plant may become a weed. The leaves and young shoots are dried and made into a powder, to which water and citric or tartaric acid from lemon juice or tamarind are added to form the dye. Oil from flowers is used in parts of Africa as a perfume in other cosmetics. This is the only species in the genus *Lawsonia*.



Photo: Patrick Maundu



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