

**Lawsonia inermis****Lythraceae****Indigenous**

**COMMON NAMES:** **Bajun:** Mvuma nyuki; **Boni:** Gomojia, Komochi, Kornochi; **Boran:** Urrur, Elmi, Elan; **English:** Henna; **Kamba:** Kitiliku, **Pokot:** Kaparamenion; **Pokomo:** Muasimini, Musurua; **Somali:** Elan, Erip; **Swahili:** Mkokoa, Mhina; **Tharaka:** Mugokora; **Turkana:** Esajait.

**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 towards the tip, 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.

**ECOLOGY:** A shrub widely distributed from North to West and Central Africa. Also cultivated in many parts of the world as an ornamental and source of dye. Common at the Kenyan coast, along river courses and in semi-arid parts of north and eastern Kenya. It is mostly restricted to flood plains of larger rivers, seasonally flooded areas and occasionally in luggas. Found, for example, around Mutomo in Kitui, in Mwingi District, lower parts of River Tana, Kibwezi area of Makuani, Tsavo East National Park and in Mandera. Agroclimatic Zones V–VI.

**USES:** Firewood, poles, farm implements (carriers for use on donkeys), bows and arrows, spear shafts, edible resin, medicine (roots, juice from bark), fodder (leaves and fruiting branches), bee forage, river-bank stabilization, thatch, live fence, dead fence (thorny branches), dye (henna), perfume (volatile oil).

**PROPAGATION:** Seedlings and cuttings.

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

**treatment:** None.

**MANAGEMENT:** Slow growing; pruning, coppicing. May become a weed.

**REMARKS:** This is the henna plant, the source of a fast brown or orange-red dye obtained from the leaves and young shoots. The dye is widely used, especially from South Asia and India west through the Middle East and the whole of North, West and eastern Africa to dye the hands and feet of women, and hair, beard, nails, eyebrows, etc. Among the Swahili, women apply henna during festivities such as weddings. It is particularly used to decorate the hands and feet of brides with intricate and artistic patterns, a meticulous and time-consuming task performed by several women over a period of up to 3 days. The dye is also used to decorate fabrics and leather. 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. The leaves and fruiting branches provide fodder for livestock. Flowers are fragrantly scented and essential oil from them is used in parts of Africa as a perfume in other cosmetics. This is the only species in the genus *Lawsonia*.

**FURTHER READING:** <http://www.worldagroforestrycentre.org/Sites/TreeDBS/AFT/AFT.htm>; Beentje, 1994; Bekele-Tesemma et al., 1993; Blundell, 1987; Bein et al., 1996; Kokwaro, 1993; Mbuya et al., 1994; Noad and Birnie, 1989.

