

***Maerua decumbens* (*M. subcordata*, *M. edulis*)****Capparidaceae****Indigenous**

**COMMON NAMES:** **Bajun:** Abiro; **Boran:** Bariyub, Agarnyaab; **Daasanach:** Haluf; **Giriama:** Mkulube; **Ilchamus:** Lamayoki, Lamayokin, Lamaloki, Lamalogi; **Kamba:** Munatha; **Luo:** Amoyo; **Maasai:** Olkiage; **Malakote:** Dawa nyoka, Dawa aaze; **Marakwet:** Chepiliowo, Chebillio (plural); **Mbeere:** Mukindaarithi, Mutunguarithi, Mundarithi, Gindarithi; **Orma:** Kukube tari, Kukube dik; **Pokomo:** Mwiya maji; **Pokot:** Chepusulwo, Chepiliswo, Chebliswo; **Samburu:** Lamuyaki; **Somali:** Abarmog (Mandera), Ohia sagara (Tana River); **Taita:** Kangalige; **Tharaka:** Munatha; **Turkana:** Eerut; **Wardei:** Ohia sagared, Oalangal.

**DESCRIPTION:** A much-branched shrub, branches stiff, ascending to 1–3 m, or a woody herb with a perennial rootstock, often large and swollen. **LEAVES:** Alternate, simple, blue-green and slightly fleshy, smooth and hairless, variable in shape from narrow oval to almost round, the tip often with a small pointed stiff protrusion (mucro); leaf 0.8–4 cm long, base usually rounded to a short stalk, only 6 mm, generally 3–5 nerved. **FLOWERS:** Yellow-green, borne singly in upper leaf axils, no petals but 3–4 narrow oval sepals about 1 cm long, the central white stamens to 2.5 cm long, the stalked ovary to 3 cm, recurved when mature. **FRUIT:** A globose or ovoid capsule, yellow-orange, 1.5–3 cm long with a pointed beak, containing 1–4 seeds.

**ECOLOGY:** A small shrub common in dry areas from Somalia, Ethiopia and Sudan in the north and south to Gauteng in South Africa. Widespread in Kenya, e.g. in northern Baringo, southern Turkana, Kitui, Mandera, Tana River and Kilifi in dry bushland and open areas in riverine vegetation. Conspicuous in burnt grassland, where it regenerates quickly from its thick woody root. Commonly found in sandy, alluvial or sandy-loam soils and in rocky areas, 0–1,800 m. Agroclimatic Zones IV–VI.

**USES:** Edible fruit, edible seeds (after boiling for a long time), edible roots (chewed to quench thirst), medicine (roots and bark: some records of toxicity), fodder, bee forage, live fence, clears muddy water, fish poison, sterilizing milk containers.

**PROPAGATION:** Wildings, seedlings.

**MANAGEMENT:** Coppices well.

**REMARK:** The pulp of the ripe fruit is sweet and may be sucked. In arid areas of northern Kenya the seeds are boiled for 3–4 hours, with the water being replaced 4–6 times, then eaten (Pokot, Turkana), or the seeds are soaked for up to 2 days, rinsed and then cooked (Bajun). The roots are added to water to make it slightly sweet. This water is used for preparing tea or as a drink which causes thirst, enabling one to drink a lot more, a useful attribute before setting out on a long journey in a hot arid area (Pokot). The roots are added to muddy water and left overnight for purification (Pokomo, Pokot, Turkana, Somali, Samburu, Bajun, Maasai (Narok), Daasanach). The roots of this species may sometimes be toxic. Several herbarium specimens bear information on incidents of toxicity, some of which have resulted in death. (Toxicity is believed to be related to the method of preparation.)

Many species in the family Capparidaceae are known for their sweetening and flocculating (water-purification) properties. Camels and goats eat the shoots, but only sparingly and mainly in the dry season. *Maerua* is a genus with a few dozen species occurring from Africa to India.

**FURTHER READING:** Beentje, 1994; Kokwaro, 1993; Maundu et al., 1999; Ruffo et al., 2002.

