

Moringa oleifera

Moringaceae



India

Am: *Shiferaw*

Eng: *Ben-oil tree, Drumstick tree, Cabbage tree, Horse-radish tree*

Ecology

A species native to northern India but now cultivated throughout the tropics, especially in arid areas. It is a drought-resistant and valuable tree, introduced to Ethiopia long ago and now naturalized in many parts of Gamo Gofa, Harerge and in the Rift Valley and tried elsewhere. Requires well-drained soils with a high water table, but is drought resistant. Occurs at low altitudes in Dry and Moist Kolla agroclimatic zones, 500–1,600 m.

Uses

Food (young leaves, young fruit), spice (young roots substitute for horse-radish or mustard), medicine, fodder (leaves, fruit), bee forage, shade, soil conservation, windbreak, fibres, live fence, boundary marker, oil (ben oil from seeds for industrial use), water purification (powder from seeds).

Description

A deciduous tree to 10 m, usually smaller, pale feathery foliage. **BARK:** Grey, thick and corky, peeling in patches. **LEAVES:** Pale green, thrice compound, the whole leaf 30–60 cm, leaflets usually oval, tip rounded 1–2 cm long. **FLOWERS:** Cream, fading yellow, in long sprays, each flower with 5 petals, one erect and 4 bent back, sweet-scented, attracting insects. **FRUIT:** Long capsules, to 45 cm, bluntly triangular in section, splitting when dry to release 9 dark

brown 3-winged seeds from the pith.

Propagation

Large stem cuttings (truncheons, more than 1 m long), root cuttings, direct sowing at site, seedlings.

Seed

Pick mature (brown) capsules from the tree, dry in the sun, put in a bag and thresh with a stick. Separate seed and chaff by hand or by winnowing. Dry further in the sun for 3–5 days. Germination rate 60–70%. 4,000–5,000 seed per kg. Germination time ranges from a few days to more than 2 months, but usually quite fast.

Treatment: Not necessary.

Storage: Seed can be stored for long periods.

Management

Fast growing; pollarding, coppicing, lopping.

Remarks

A tree which is easily propagated and recommended for homesteads for its food value. The “Ben oil” from the seeds keeps its quality and has been used to lubricate precision machinery like watches. It is also used as salad oil and in soap and cosmetics. The ground-up seeds can be used to clear muddy water, but all the purified water should be consumed in less than 24 hours or else bacteria could re-multiply. The wood is soft. Root bark contains poisonous alkaloids, so care should be taken in its use as a spice or medicine. It is said to cause dizziness.



Photos: Patrick Maundu



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