

Ocotea usambarensis

Lauraceae

Indigenous

COMMON NAMES: Embu: Muzura; **English:** East African camphor wood; **Kikuyu:** Muthaiti; **Meru:** Muura; **Taita:** Mkongo.

DESCRIPTION: Mature trees may reach 40 m with a massive trunk up to 3 m across. Young trees are green-grey with a conical shape. Leaves and wood are camphor scented, but not the bark. Branchlets are slightly hairy. **BARK:** Grey, granular, then red-brown, scaling in large flakes. **LEAVES:** Dark green, oval to rounded, grey-white below, the veins wavy and brown, the edge thickened. **FLOWERS:** Separate male and female flowers, 8–10 yellow-white-green flowers, hairy and stalked. **FRUIT:** A smooth green drupe, very small, seeds surrounded by pulp.

ECOLOGY: A majestic evergreen timber tree widely distributed from the eastern parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda, throughout eastern Africa to northern parts of Malawi and Zambia. It is more common in wetter forests. For optimum growth it requires deep fertile soils with good drainage. Once dominant in the wet forests of the eastern Aberdares and southern Mt Kenya, up to 2,600 m, also in Taita Hills, but now rare everywhere due to over-exploitation. Agroclimatic Zones I–II.

USES: Firewood, charcoal, timber (joinery), poles, furniture, veneer, plywood, panelling, medicine (roots and inner bark).

PROPAGATION: Root suckers, seedlings.

SEED: Fruit may be attacked by insects, but the tree produces plenty of seed. About 1,500 seeds per kg. Germination rate at the most 45% in 30–45 days, but it is often sporadic, within 2–3 months. Pulp should be separated from seed by rubbing and floating in water.

treatment: Not necessary.

storage: Sow seed immediately after extraction. Storage in moist sawdust can prolong the lifespan of the seed a little.

MANAGEMENT: Fast growing.

REMARKS: Planting of this useful, valuable (and now rare) tree should be encouraged. The timber is one of the best for furniture, although not resistant to termites. The tree is easily propagated from root suckers, a practice widely used in northern Tanzania.

O. kenyensis (**Kikuyu:** Muthaiti; **Kipsigis:** Mututuriet; **Tugen:** Knaget) is another evergreen tree to 30 m with a dark grey flaking bark. It can be distinguished from the other species by its leaves, which are greenish beneath, and the branchlets, which are not hairy. This species too has good timber. It is found in highland



mist forests 1,150–2,100 m, from Taita Hills north through the central Kenya highlands, including Mt Kenya, north to Mt Kulal near Lake Turkana. The genus *Ocotea* has many valuable timber species. Most of its several hundred members are, however, tropical American and, to a lesser extent, Indian Ocean island species.

FURTHER READING: <http://www.worldagroforestrycentre.org/Sites/TreeDBS/AFT/AFT.htm>; Albrecht, 1993; Beentje, 1994; Katende et al., 1995; Kokwaro, 1993; Mbuya et al., 1994.

