

Spirostachys venenifera

Euphorbiaceae

Indigenous

COMMON NAMES: **Boran:** Siricho; **Duruma:** Mtanga; **Giriama:** Mutanga; **Malakote:** Mwacha; **Orma:** Wolkon; **Pokomo:** Mtolo, Mtongotongo, Mutongotango, Mchalaka; **Sanya:** Mtanga; **Somali:** Haiyah badad, Ayabedeo; **Swahili:** Mtanga; **Tharaka:** Mureetha; **Wardei:** Walkon.

DESCRIPTION: A tree usually 5–7 m high, occasionally to 12 m, with twiggy branches that hang low. **Milky latex present.** **BARK:** Dark grey, fissured. **LEAVES:** Simple, to 6 cm long, widest at base or middle narrowing to a blunt tip, base usually rounded, margin with **shallow rounded teeth**. **FLOWERS:** Small, less than 1 mm, borne on narrow reddish brown **spikes to 7 cm** on leaf axils. **Stalk 1–2.5 cm long.** **FRUIT:** 3-lobed, to 1 cm long.

ECOLOGY: Found in rocky areas, also in river valleys and swamps; 0–1,450 m. Agroclimatic Zones III–VI. Fruits year-round.

USES: Timber, poles, tool handles, carvings, bows, wooden combs, medicine (treatment of prolapsed uterus).

REMARKS: The latex of this species is said to be poisonous to livestock and people. It irritates the eyes and may cause blindness. The bark, mixed with bark of other species, is burned and the fragrant smoke and ash are used in beehives to attract swarms. Tharaka women also use the sweet-smelling and fragrant smoke from burning a mixture of dry wood chips from this tree and roots of *Justicia odora* and *Ocotea usambarensis* as a perfume. The wood cannot be worked fresh because of the sticky latex, but the tree is cut and left for 2–3 weeks to dry before use. Among the Pokomo, this tree is left in farms for its good shade.

A related and very similar species is *S. africana* (**Duruma:** Msarakana; **Swahili:** Msarakana). Leaves and flowers resemble those of *S. venenifera*. Flower spikes up to 2.5 cm with a relatively short stalk (to 1 cm), these being the main distinguishing features between the two species. Fruit is up to 12 mm. It is found at the coast below 900 m in riverine vegetation and also coastal bushland. The heartwood is heavy and fragrant. Used in wood carving at the coast.

FURTHER READING: Beentje, 1994.

