

Sterculia africana

Sterculiaceae

Indigenous

Common names: Eng: African star chestnut, tick tree; Gogo: mluze; Nyam: mhozya, muhozya.

Ecology: An indigenous tree occurring from Kenya to South Africa. It is commonly found at low altitudes in hot dry areas, on rocky hills or the fringes of woodlands. The bare-branched tree with pale bark stands out. Scattered in occurrence, usually below 600 m.

Uses: Timber (furniture), bee forage, rope (bark), mats (bark), gum.

Description: A deciduous tree with a thick, fluted trunk, usually 5-12 m but may reach 25 m, the erect branches spreading to a rounded crown. Branches soft and brittle. BARK: smooth, often shiny white, later flaking irregularly into patches to reveal a beautiful underbark purple-green-white-brown. LEAVES: crowded at the tips of branches, deeply divided with 3-5 lobes, over 10 cm across, on a stalk to 10 cm, lobes pointed. FLOWERS: appear on the bare tree, sexes separate on the same tree, in branched heads to 9 cm, green-yellow sepals (no petals) joined together, 2.5 cm across with red honey-guide lines within. FRUIT: 1-5 woody beaked sections, boat-shaped, with short yellow hairs. One side only breaks open to free 3-10 flat, blue-grey seeds which hang like ticks around the open edge.

Propagation: Seedlings, cuttings.

Seed info.: No. of seeds per kg: 15,000-17,000. Germination good and fast, completed after 20 days.

treatment: not necessary.

storage: can retain viability only for a short period (2 months) if kept at room temperature.

Management: Pruning, coppicing.

Remarks: The hairs on the fruit irritate the skin, but the fruit has been added to snuff to improve the flavour. The soft light wood only makes local furniture items. The bark rope can be used to tie thatching materials and poles in house construction.

