

Swartzia madagascariensis

Papilionoideae

Indigenous

English: Snake-bean tree

Nyanja: Mchelekete

Tumbuka: Mulundu

Ecology: A small tree distributed from West Africa to Tanzania and South Africa at medium to low altitudes. It is an occasional tree of deciduous woodland throughout Zambia, either in sandy soils or the clay-loams of valleys.

Uses: **Timber** (carving), **medicine** (pods, bark, leaves), bee forage, fish poison (pods), **insecticide** (crushed pods, bark, roots).

Description: A small deciduous tree, usually 3–4 m but up to 15 m; the **trunk and branches** often twisted; the **crown dense and rounded when in leaf**. **BARK:** very rough and thick, with long lines of cracks. **LEAVES:** compound, grey-black, **7–11 leaflets alternate along the stalk**, plus one leaflet at the tip; each one leathery, tip rounded or notched to 7 cm, yellow hairy below. **FLOWERS:** in sprays of 2–10, sweet-smelling, each flower with **one large erect petal**, September–November, and casual flowering March–May. **FRUIT:** the long heavy fruit hang on the bare tree, **cylindrical dark brown to 30 cm**, the “snake-bean”, straight or curved. The pods eventually fall and 10–15 seeds are set free from the gummy yellow tissue when the pods rot, May–September.

Propagation: Seedlings.

Seed: No. of seeds per kg: 2,500. Germination is good, up to 70% after 20 days.

treatment: Soak in hot water and allow to cool for 24 hours.

storage: Can be stored.

Management: Pruning, coppicing.

Remarks: This tree has many uses and should be cultivated by farmers. Termite-resistant. The wood is even and close-grained. The red-brown heartwood, which is favoured by wood carvers, may become purple-black. Pods contain saponin and if fed to cows may taint their milk. Crushed pods have been used in storage bins to protect grain from weevils. Powder from pods mixed with bark and roots may be added to hot water and the cooled liquid sprayed around the seedlings to protect against termites.

