

Vernonia amygdalina

Asteraceae (Compositae)

Indigenous

COMMON NAMES: **English:** Bitter leaf; **Kisii:** Omororia; **Luhya:** Musuritsa, Omulusya; **Luhya (Bukusu):** Kumwilulusia, Kumululusia; **Luo:** Olusia, Olulusia; **Nandi:** Cheburiandet; **Sabaot:** Cheburiundet.

DESCRIPTION: A shrub to 3 m, sometimes a small tree to 10 m with a wide bole and brittle branches. Young stems hairy. **BARK:** Pale grey, flaking later. **LEAVES:** **Alternate and oval, 10–20 cm long, widest in the middle, tapering both ends**, dark green above, almost hairless, but often with soft pale hairs below, edge usually entire but may be widely toothed. **FLOWERS:** Tiny, green–white–pink, in small heads, 6 mm across, less than 1 cm long. Very many heads together on a **widely branched stalk, flattened and up to 30 cm across**, sweet scented in the evening. **FRUIT:** Tiny seeds (achenes) with stiff white hairs.

ECOLOGY: Widely distributed throughout tropical Africa, in humid and subhumid areas. Found in wooded grassland and at forest edges. Often cultivated in West Africa for its leaves. In Kenya, locally common in western Kenya in disturbed areas and abandoned cultivation, where it may form thickets. Also common at forest edges and often left as dispersed trees in pasture land. It is found on light shallow soils, 1,300–2,300 m. Agroclimatic Zones I–III. Flowers in December–March and fruits in March–April in Bungoma.

USES: Firewood, edible leaves (leafy vegetable), medicine (bark, roots, leaves), ornamental, soil conservation, live fence, toothbrushes, stakes (branches), veterinary medicine.

PROPAGATION: Seedlings, cuttings.

SEED: Dry mature flower heads are harvested, dried in the sun, crushed and seeds cleaned by winnowing. About 850,000 seeds per kg. Low germination rate.

treatment: Not required.

storage: May be stored for a short time.

MANAGEMENT: Medium- to fast-growing; coppicing.

REMARKS: The branches resist termite attack, making them useful for fences, support for earth works and stakes. A very important plant in Central and West Africa, where it is cultivated for its use as a vegetable. Over 40 other species of *Vernonia* are known to exist in Kenya. Many of them are, however, annuals or woody herbs. A notable species is *V. myriantha*, a large forest-edge shrub or small tree occurring mainly in western Kenya with large stalkless leaves and large terminal bunches of white to mauve flowers.

FURTHER READING: <http://www.worldagroforestrycentre.org/Sites/TreeDBS/AFT/AFT.htm>; Backes and Ahenda, 1998; Beentje, 1994; Bein et al., 1996; Bekele-Tesemma et al., 1993; Fichtl and Adi, 1994; ITDG and IIRR, 1996; Katende et al., 1995, 1999; Kokwaro, 1993; Maundu et al., 1999; Palgrave and Palgrave, 2002.

