

Vitex keniensis

Verbenaceae

Indigenous

STANDARD/TRADE NAME: Meru oak, Kenya oak.

COMMON NAMES: **English:** Meru oak; **Kikuyu:** Muhuru; **Meru:** Muuru.

DESCRIPTION: A tall deciduous tree to 35 m with a heavy rounded crown and a clear, straight bole. **BARK:** Grey to pale brown with narrow vertical fissures, dark brown with age. **LEAVES:** Compound, digitate (like fingers), with 5 leaflets, up to 25 cm long on a long hairy stalk. Leaflets widest at the middle and often unequal at the base; light green and sandpapery above, pale green and densely hairy beneath, largest leaflet to 21 cm long. **FLOWERS:** Small, to 8 mm long, borne on loose, branched side heads, to 18 cm long, creamy white, each flower with one large prominent mauve petal. **FRUIT:** Nearly rounded, about 1.5 cm long, black when ripe, the hairy calyx remaining. Each fruit with one stone. Black ripe fruits fall to the ground.

ECOLOGY: A Kenyan tree occurring in a restricted range from 1,300 to 2,100 m on the eastern slopes of Mt Kenya (Meru) and possibly in Ngangao forest, Taita. Prefers deep red to sandy-loam soils. Agroclimatic Zones II–III. Fruits in October around Mt Kenya. Flowers in December and January in Nairobi.

USES: Firewood, timber (high quality), poles, furniture, veneer, panelling, edible fruit, ornamental, windbreak, shade.

PROPAGATION: Seedlings, wildings.

SEED: The tree produces plenty of seed. Germination rate about 50%. About 2,500 stones per kg. Each fruit has one large stone, which bears 1–4 seeds (multi-germ).

treatment: Not necessary, but soaking in cold water improves germination.

storage: Preferable to use fresh seed.

MANAGEMENT: Prune to get a clear bole. Several seedlings may germinate from one stone. Can be separated and pricked out. Coppicing.

REMARKS: The tree has become rare due to over-exploitation; planting should be encouraged. The timber is hard and durable, pale yellow to light brown with darker heartwood and a wavy grain. The fruits are eaten only in emergency; not as good as those of *V. doniana*.

FURTHER READING: <http://www.worldagroforestrycentre.org/Sites/TreeDBS/AFT/AFT.htm>; Albrecht, 1993; Beentje, 1994; Dharani, 2002; Mbuya et al., 1994; Noad and Birnie, 1989.

