

Balanites aegyptiaca

Balanitaceae (Simaroubaceae)

Indigenous

English: Desert date
Kunda: Nkuyu
Senga: Mubambang'oma

Ecology: A very common and useful tree in arid to sub-humid areas of tropical Africa, even extending into India, 0–1,500 m. It is found in most parts of Zambia and in Eastern Province is common in the mopane woodlands of the Luangwa Valley. It can grow on almost any type of soil including clay pans and is very drought-resistant. Wild animals and goats eat the foliage and fruit despite the sharp thorns.

Uses: Firewood, timber (utensils), poles, **food** (fruit, drink), medicine (roots, bark, gum, fruit), **fodder** (leaves, fruit, young shoots), windbreak, oil (seeds), water purification (e.g. saponin in fruit kills snails which carry bilharzia), gum, live fence, fencing (dry branches).

Description: An evergreen spiny shrub, scrambler or tree to 6 m, crown rounded in a tangled mass of branches, often drooping. **BARK:** yellow then dark brown–black, cracked and scaling, producing gum if cut. **Spines** green and soft, becoming **sharp and woody, to 8 cm**. **LEAVES:** distinctive **pairs of grey-green leaflets**, ovate to 5 cm, fleshy to leathery. **FLOWERS:** fragrant yellow-green clusters; September–December. **FRUIT:** yellow-orange, **oblong to 5 cm, both ends rounded**, a hard pointed seed surrounded by yellow-brown bittersweet flesh, seed easily separated; April–August.

Propagation: Seedlings, direct seeding, cuttings, root suckers.

Seed: No. of seeds per kg: 500–1,500.
treatment: Soak the seeds in cold water for two days.
storage: Can be stored up to a year.

Management: Coppicing.

Remarks: An important tree with many uses in the Sahel and in India. The few mature trees that grow naturally on the plateau indicate that this useful species could be more widely planted in Eastern Province. It is already widely used in the Valley. As it tolerates seasonal waterlogging, it is useful for fencing dimba (vegetable gardens). Gum mixed with porridge has been used to treat chest trouble; bark has been used to treat syphilis and the oil from kernels to treat sleeping sickness. The timber is termite-resistant.

