

Diospyros mespiliformis

Ebenaceae

Indigenous

Standard/Trade name: African ebony.

COMMON NAMES: **Digo:** Mbara, Mkulu; **Duruma:** Mpweke; **English:** African ebony, Jackal berry; **Giriama:** Mkulwe, Mkuluye; **Kamba:** Mukoo; **Kambe:** Mkulwe, **Malakote:** Mokowlo; **Mbeere:** Mukoro; **Meru:** Muroko; **Orma:** Kolati gurati; **Pokomo:** Mkuru, Mkuro; **Somali:** Korati (Tana River), Kolati; **Swahili:** Msindi, Mgombe, Mkadi, Mpweke, Mgiriti; **Taveta:** Mugongolo; **Teso:** Ekum; **Turkana:** Egum, Egumoit.

DESCRIPTION: A medium-sized to large tree, to 25 m. There may be a tall clear bole from a buttressed base to the dense rounded crown. Young parts have silvery hairs. **BARK:** Grey-black, rough and squared, grooved. **LEAVES:** Shiny dark green, alternate, to 14 x 3 cm, the midrib raised below, edge wavy, tip rounded. **FLOWERS:** Fragrant, male clustered, female solitary, cream-white petals, 1 cm. **FRUIT:** Rounded, to 2.5 cm, in a calyx cup, the 5 segments curling back, fruit yellow, later purple; pulp soft and sweet with 4–6 brown hairy seeds.

ECOLOGY: An evergreen tree of medium to low altitudes found in West, eastern and southern Africa in woodland, savanna and along river banks. In Kenya, the species is more common around Kibwezi in Makueni District and also in Meru, Kwale and Taita Taveta Districts. Found near watercourses in dry bushland, on termite mounds, on lava flows in semi-evergreen thickets and on rocky hillsides, especially in gullies, 0–1,500 m. Agroclimatic Zones IV–VI. Seeds in December–February at the coast.

USES: Firewood, charcoal, timber (construction), furniture, carvings, walking sticks, edible fruit, food (porridge made from fruit), drink (made from fermented fruit), medicine (bark, roots, fruit), bee forage, shade, ornamental.

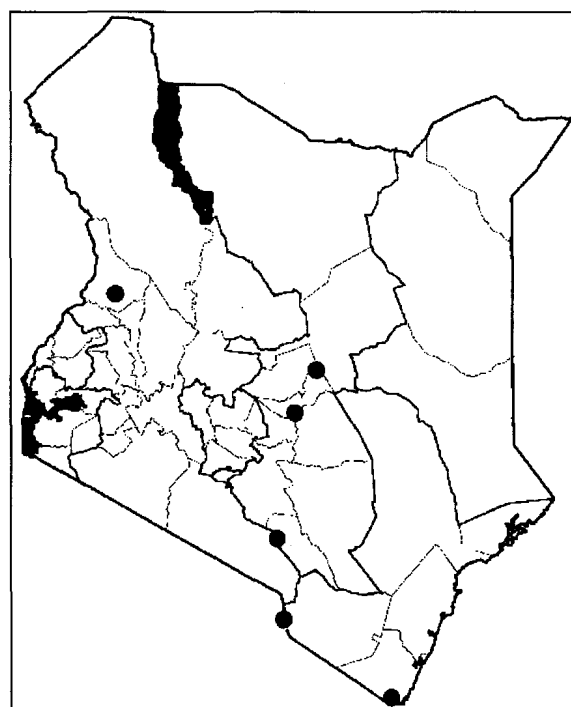
PROPAGATION: Seedlings.

SEED: Because of competition by birds, seeds should be collected immediately after fruit starts to turn yellow, and therefore from the crown. Depulp and clean under running water. Dry in the sun if seed is to be stored. About 2,700–3,200 seeds per kg. Germination is good but fairly slow—within 50 days under ideal conditions.

treatment: None.

storage: It can be stored for long periods in airtight containers.

MANAGEMENT: Slow growing, but faster along rivers.



Diospyros mespiliformis (cont)

REMARKS: *Diospyros* spp. produce the valuable black heartwood 'ebony', an excellent source of timber. The wood is hard, heavy, with fine grain, very durable even in damp conditions, and fungus and termite resistant. Sapwood cream-white, heartwood yellowish pink, darkening on drying and with age. The fruit can be eaten fresh or dried or in the form of a fermented drink. Ripe fruit sweet, eaten raw (Digo, Turkana, Taita, Embu, Mbeere, Kamba). Seeds may be eaten or discarded. Fruits are collected in bulk and made into a kind of porridge

that is eaten in times of famine (Mbeere). Shedding of old leaves seen to signal the coming of the rainy season (Mbeere). A good tree for hanging beehives (Mbeere).

FURTHER READING: <http://www.worldagroforestrycentre.org/Sites/TreeDBS/AFT/AFT.htm>; Albrecht, 1993; Beentje, 1994; Bein et al., 1996; Bekele-Tesemma et al., 1993; Fichtl and Adi, 1994; Katende et al., 1995, 1999; Kokwaro, 1993; Maundu et al., 1999; Mbuya et al., 1994; Noad and Birnie, 1989; Palgrave and Palgrave, 2002; Ruffo et al., 2002; van Wyk, 1993; von Maydell, 1990.

