

LISSATABA TREE OF THE MONTH

February 2022

Introducing one of southern Africa's most valued trees, the mighty Marula.



The Marula in winter, showing off its rounded crown.

Tree of the month: Marula

Other names: Maroela (Afr.), Nkanyi (Tsonga), *Sclerocarya birrea* (Lat.),

Sclerocarya – Greek for a hard walnut – the hard kernel inside the fleshy fruit.

Birrea - refers to the common name of this tree in Senegal, "birr".

SA Tree number: 360

This medium to large deciduous tree can be found throughout Lissataba and is distinctive with its erect trunk and rounded, spreading crown. It favours bushveld and woodland habitats. The bark is another useful tool by which to identify this tree; it is rough, grey-brown and flakes off in round pieces. Beautiful specimens of these trees can be found in the gardens at the clubhouse.





The twigs and branchlets are sturdy with thick tips and the leaves are clustered at these tips. The leaves are dark green above and paler bluish-green below. The leaflet stalks or petiolules are noticeably long.



The male and female flowers of the Marula grow on separate trees; the male flowers appear in spikes at the end of the branchlets or in the axils of the leaves, whereas the female flowers appear singly or in small clusters near the branch tips. Regardless of gender, the flowers appear red in bud, gradually changing to pinkish-white (Sept-Nov). The image to the right is of a male flower growing on a Marula along the Open Plains Road at Lissataba.



The fruit of the Marula is rich in vitamin C and has been feeding people (and animals) since ancient times. The female trees produce large, fleshy, pale green fruit which ripen to yellow after falling from the tree (Jan-Mar). These plum-like fruit can be used to make juice, jelly and even an alcoholic beer which is called Mukumbi by the Vhavenda tribe. Everyone is also familiar with the commercially produced Marula liqueur made from this fruit. The white nut within the centre of the fruit is highly nutritious and can be eaten as is or mixed with vegetables (raw, cooked or ground).



The tree you drive under on Rock Fig Road going to Heron Dam is another great example of this species.



Another example of the rounded crown of the Marula, taken in Summer.

Interestingly, in traditional medicine, a powdered preparation of the bark is taken by pregnant women to determine the gender of the infant; for a girl she would drink a preparation from the female plant and vice versa for a boy.

The conditions of dysentery, diarrhoea and rheumatism can be treated with a decoction of the bark (which has proven antihistamine and anti-diarrhoea properties) which is also an excellent remedy for haemorrhoids. The bark is also reported to have a prophylactic effect on malaria. Marula leaves can be used to make a drink for the treatment of gonorrhoea. Apparently, in the former homeland of Venda, it was considered a criminal offence to chop down a living specimen of this tree.

Furniture, panelling, flooring, carvings and spoons are made from the wood and the inner layer of the bark makes a strong rope. Drums as well as yokes for animals are also made from the wood. In Namibia, the wood is used by some people for sledges. The trunk can also be made into boats. Red-brown dye can be produced from the fresh skin of the bark. Even the gum (rich in tannin) can be mixed with soot to be used as ink.

Many insects utilise the tree to breed and feed on. The beautiful African moon moth (*Argema mimosae*) is one such example. The leaves are browsed by game and the bark is stripped by elephants.



Larval and adult form of the African moon moth

Reference sources:

Books

Schmidt, E., Lotter, M. & McClelland, W. (2017). *Trees and Shrubs of Mpumalanga and Kruger National Park*. Jacana Media, Johannesburg.

Van Wyk, B. and van Wyk, P. (1997). *Field Guide to Trees of Southern Africa*. Struik, Cape Town.

Websites:

<http://pza.sanbi.org/sclerocarya-birrea>

Photo credit for the image of the Marula fruit to the following website:

<https://www.krugerpark.co.za/krugerpark-times-3-8-elephant-myth-22760.html>

Photo credit for the image of the African moon moth to the following website:

<https://www.childreninthewilderness.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Childrens-Workbook-Insect-Themed.pdf>

Remainder of photo's – Robyn-Lynne Reid

