

TREES OF LISSATABA PRIVATE GAME RESERVE

OCTOBER 2022



Tree of the month: Lowveld Milkberry

Other names: Laeveld-melkbessie (Afr.), N'wambu (Ts.), *Manilkara mochisia* (Latin)

Mochisia: Greek word meaning 'to spill out' which could be referring to the milky latex which drips from broken parts of the plant.

SA Tree number: 587

Reference books on the subject describe this medium-sized lowveld deciduous to evergreen tree as occurring in a variety of bushveld types but that it prefers have its roots in clay soils and termite mounds. On Lissataba, it lives up to this description as the species is not confined to any specific habitat. I highly recommend a botanical outing along the Hippo Trail. A stroll along this route affords one the opportunity to see many wonderful specimens of the Lowveld Milkberry. I hadn't thought to report on this tree for some time yet until, during a recent birding excursion on the reserve; my attention was drawn to an intense, sweet fragrance. Upon investigation, the source was traced to a Lowveld Milkberry literally dripping with clusters of greenish-yellow flowers (Oct –Nov).



When in flower, many insects are attracted to the tree, particularly bees, which in turn lure insectivorous birds to the area.

What I found most striking about this tree when I first identified it was the leaf structures and their arrangements on the plant. The leaves appear densely clustered at the end of branches and side branchlets. As beautifully described by Megan Emmett, the clusters are like rosettes.



They are glossy green on the upper surface with the underside appearing paler. They are thick and leathery and leak milky latex when picked from the plant. Each leaf has a distinct yellow mid-vein with the side veins also fairly obvious. The leaf tips are rounded and often have a deep notch.

Leaves are sometimes browsed but not extensively and are used medicinally to treat depression.



In my experience with this plant, the bark in large specimens is dark and rough with patterns of vertical cracks. Flaking of the dark bark reveals a lighter colour beneath. Younger plants have creamy pale bark.

Trunk bark is used medicinally to treat mastitis by pounding the bark into a powder and mixing this with groundnut or sesame (simsim) oil to make a paste. Infusions and decoctions of the bark can also be used to treat diarrhoea and emetic illnesses. Some Southern African communities also use the bark to treat brittle bones and backache. The wood is termite-proof, dark red and durable and used for fence posts, furniture, implement handles, carvings and spoons.

The edible, bright yellow (when ripe), oval-shaped berry of the Lowveld Milkberry appears from January to March. It has red pulp with 1-3 seeds contained within it and is milky, giving rise to the tree's common name. Each fruit has a sharp bristle at the end. When in fruit, the tree is visited by many bird species as well as monkeys, bushpigs and civets to eat the sweet berries. Farmers have also considered growing the tree commercially for its fruit as it is considered one of the tastiest local wild fruit. It is used to make jam, drinks and jelly.

A decoction of the roots is used in tradition medicine as a mouth wash for toothache and the leaf sap can be applied topically to manage earache.

I encourage you to go exploring and adding this versatile lowveld tree to your list.

Reference sources:

Books

Emmet, M. (2013). *If Trees Could Talk*. Jacana, Auckland Park.

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

<https://www.southworld.net/herbs-plants-manilkara-mochisia-a-vital-medicine-plant/>

Images: All photo's – Robyn-Lynne Reid

