PLANT FACT SHEET

Vitex doniana Sweet

GENUS *Vitex* **FAMILY** Lamiaceae

COMMON NAMES African plum, African Oak, Black plum

EDIBLE PARTS AND USES

Edible parts: Leaves, Fruit, Vegetable

The pounded pulp of the fruit is put in a basket and water is strained through it repeatedly. The extract is then concentrated by boiling. The ripe (black) fruit are eaten fresh.
The fruit are also candied or made into jam and wine.
Young leaves are cooked and eaten with peanut paste and salt and pepper.
Fruit can be sun dried and stored for later use.
The fruit are roasted and used to make a drink substitute for tea or coffee.
The seeds inside the hard shell are edible.

DESCRIPTION

A deciduous tree. It can be 8-14 m tall. It has a heavy rounded crown. The trunk is clear. It can be 1 m across. The bark is pale brown or grey white. It has long cracks along it and the ridges are sticky. The base of old trees has scales. The leaves occur opposite one another. They are compound leaves arranged like the fingers on a hand with 5 leaflets. They are leathery and shiny. Each leaflet can be 5-18 cm long and 3-7.5 cm wide. They have a common leaf stalk which can be 22 cm long. The base of the leaflet is wedge shaped and the tip is rounded. The flowers have a smell. They occur in dense bunches of up to 20 on a long stalk. The flower bunch can be 12 cm across. Each flower is cream with one hairy violet lobe. The outer case of the flower bud forms a hairy cup around the base of the fruit. The fruit is smooth and oblong and 3 cm long. It is green marked with white dots. The fruit turn black when ripe. The pulp is edible. Inside there is a hard nut with 1-4 seeds.

HABITAT

It is a tropical plant. It grows in the lowlands and the highlands. It occurs in coastal woodlands in East Africa. It is generally at lower altitudes and can be in savannah. It grows in the Sahel. It requires a high water table. It suits areas with a rainfall between 700-2,000 mm per year. It grows naturally in areas with minimum temperatures of 10°C and maximum of 31°C. It grows from sea level to 1900 m altitude in Tanzania. It tends to be on alluvial soils or near watercourses. It can grow in arid places. It grows in Miombo woodland in Africa.

PRODUCTION

Cultivation

Plants are grown from seed. Because several seedlings can grow from each nut and these can be pricked out as separate plants, it is probably best to grow seedlings in a nursery and separate them before planting into the field. To collect seed the fleshy part of the fruit should be removed then the seed soaked in cold water for 24 hours to quicken germination. Germination can be slow. It can take 3 months for seeds to germinate. Seed are best sown fresh but if dry stored for 1 year before planting the germination time is shortened to 1.5-2 months. Plants can be grown from root suckers. Plants can be budded.

Harvesting and Seed Production

Plants only grow at a medium rate. Plants can be topped or can regrow from plants which are cut back. It probably takes 5-10 years till first fruit are produced. Fruit take 8-10 months to reach maturity. Fruit ripen April to August in Zambia, January to April in Tanzania and December to June in the Sahel. Fruit are harvested by climbing and shaking the branches.

NOTES

Also put in the family Verbenaceae.

PICTURES



Credit: Food Plants International (Bruce French)

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