PLANT FACT SHEET

Vitellaria paradoxa subsp. nilotica (Kotschy) A. N. Henry, Chithra & N. C. Nair

GENUS *Vitellaria* **FAMILY** Sapotaceae

COMMON NAMES Shea butter tree

EDIBLE PARTS AND USES

Edible parts: Nuts, Seeds, Vegetable

The seed can be used for food. The fruit kernel is used for shea butter.

DESCRIPTION

A medium sized tree. It loses its leaves during the year. It grows to 10-20 m tall. It has a thick trunk up to 4 m tall before branching. There are many branches and the crown is spreading. The branches are thick and they have many leaf scars. The bark is dark brown and thick and rough. It is chequered like a crocodile skin. The leaves are oblong and at the ends of branches. The leaves are 10-25 cm long. The tip is rounded and the leaf narrows to a long stalk. The leaf stalks are 10 cm long. The young leaves are reddish brown. The flowers are white and with a sweet scent. They occur in dense clusters in the axils of leaves. There are 8-10 sepals, petals and stamen. The fruit is egg shaped. It is about 4-6 cm long. The pulp is sweet and has one large seed embedded in it. The seed has a shiny brown coat and a long white scar on one side.

HABITAT

A tropical plant. It is most common is savannah woodland where the rainfall is 1,000-3,000 mm a year. Trees will survive annual fires. They are also not damaged by termites.

PRODUCTION

Cultivation

Because the seedlings have a long tap root it is best to sow them direct. The fruit can be collected in heaps and the flesh allowed to rot off over 3-4 weeks then dried to collect the seeds for planting. Seed should be then sown as fresh as possible.

Harvesting and Seed Production

Trees take 30 years to mature. They can produce fruit in 15-25 years with good management. Shea butter is extracted from the seeds by roasting, grinding and then boiling the seeds.

NOTES

Seeds contain 45-60 % oil. This becomes solid at temperatures less than 32°C.
The oil can be used for cooking and in soap and margarine.

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