

Pappea Capensis:

Family: Sapindaceae (litchi or soap-berry family)

Common names: jacket plum, Indaba tree, bushveld cherry (Eng.); doppruim (Afr.); umQhokwane, umVuna, iNdaba (Zulu); iliTye, umGqalutye (Xhosa); mongatane, Mopsinyugane (Northern Sotho); liLetsa (Swati); Xikwakwaxu, Gulaswimbi (Tsonga)



The red fruit of this tree is a tasty treat for humans and a firm favourite with birds and animals. A fine oil is extracted from the seeds. The jacket plum is related to the litchi and is a natural addition for the bird or wildlife garden. It is easily cultivated, although slow-growing in colder climates.

Description

The jacket plum is a long-lived, hardy, evergreen,

small to medium tree with a height of 2-8 m. Under ideal conditions it can grow at a moderate rate but can be slow-growing under dry and/or cold conditions.

The leaves are simple and oblong, hard-textured and wavy. The leaf margin may vary from sharply toothed (especially in young growth) to almost smooth in mature growth. The greenish flowers are borne on catkins in the axils of the leaves, followed by round green velvety fruits which split open to reveal bright red flesh with a dark brown to black seed imbedded within.



Distribution

Pappea capensis is widespread in southern Africa from the Northern Cape through the drier Karoo, Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, to the northern provinces, as well as Mozambique, Zimbabwe and northwards into eastern and southern tropical Africa. It naturally occurs in bushveld, riverine thicket, wooded grassland and rocky outcrops in grassland as well as scrub veld and is often found on termite mounds. Due to its wide distribution range it is well suited to cultivation in a wide variety of climatic conditions.

Derivation of name and historical aspects

The generic name *Pappea* is named after a German physician and plant collector Carl Pappé, while the specific name *capensis* refers to southern Africa. *Pappea capensis* belongs to the same family as the popular fruit, the litchi. The family is represented in South Africa most notably by the false currants (*Allophylus* spp.), the well-known and widely cultivated sand olive (*Dodonaea viscosa*) and the bushveld red-balloon (*Erythrophysa transvaalensis*).

This species was previously known as two separate varieties (*Pappea capensis* var. *capensis* and *P. capensis* var. *radlkoferii*). However, it is now widely accepted that it was just regional variation which resulted in confusion between an arid form from drier areas and a more lush form from regions of higher rainfall.

Ecology

The fruit is eaten by various frugivorous birds and animals which in turn distribute the seeds in their droppings. The leaves are browsed by game such as elephant, giraffe, kudu, nyala, bushbuck, and grey duiker as well as domestic stock animals.

The jacket plum has also been recorded as the larval food plant to the caterpillars of the following butterflies of southern Africa:

Common hairtail butterfly (*Anthene definita definita*)

Brown playboy butterfly (*Virachola antalus*)

Pearlspotted charaxes (*Charaxes jahlusa*)

Gold-banded forester (*Euphaedra neophron*)

The sweetly scented flowers attract a wide variety of insects which in turn attract many birds. The seed is parasitized by a small, bright red bug (*Leptocoris hexophthalma*) which sucks the oil from the seed on the ground below the tree.

Uses and cultural aspects

The delicious and very juicy fruit with a tart flavour is used to make preserve, jelly, vinegar and an alcoholic drink.

Fragrant non-drying golden yellow oil is extracted from the roasted seeds. There are reports of it being used for oiling rifles. It is also used as a purgative and for lubrication, as a cure for ringworm, to restore hair, as well as for making soap.

Leaves, bark and the oil extracted from the seed are used medicinally against baldness, ringworm, nosebleeds, chest complaints, eye infections, and venereal disease. Bark is also used in protective charms that are sprinkled on the ground. Some research has reported that the leaves are very effective in killing snails. Infusions of the bark are also used by Kenyan Masai warriors to gain courage as well as an aphrodisiac and a blood-strengthening tonic. The root is used orally or as an enema and as a purgative for cattle.

Lobengula's Indaba tree, which stands in the state house in Bulawayo in Zimbabwe, is an ancient specimen of *Pappea capensis*.

The wood is hard, light brown with a reddish tint, tough and heavy with a twisted grain. There is apparently little difference between the heartwood and the sapwood. The stems seldom attain significant girth and therefore do not yield much useable wood. It is, however, used to make sticks, poles, cattle yokes, furniture and kitchen utensils. This tree is still used as an important source of traditional medicine today.



Growing *Pappea capensis*

The jacket plum is a worthy addition to any garden no matter what part of the country you live in. It can tolerate both cold and heat as well as prolonged periods of drought. It may be used as a specimen tree or as a focal point. Its attractive pale grey stem often has patches of darker colours. It is useful as a street tree or for shade in parking lots as it does not have an aggressive root system. It is also well suited to being employed as part of a mixed screen or wind barrier or as part of a natural bushclump in a wildlife-friendly garden or in large landscapes such as parks and golf courses. As it seldom attains tremendous dimensions it also lends itself to being used in townhouse gardens. It develops a closed, dense crown under cultivation in areas of higher rainfall, which creates a cool shady place for a garden bench.

The new leaves are an attractive pinky-bronze when they emerge in spring, this contrasts well with the dark green of the old leaves making an attractive display.

The trees flower from September to May (southern hemisphere) and the rather special fruit is produced from December to July. The dense crown is popular with nesting birds as it provides a concealed and sheltered nesting sites.

Seed should be collected from the ripe fruits. Remove the red flesh. Store or sow immediately. Sow seed in trays using a well-drained seedling mixture with some river sand added. The seed should be pressed into the medium and covered with approximately 5 mm of sand or seedling medium. Keep the trays in a warm and lightly shaded position until germination, which may take from six to ten weeks under ideal conditions. The seedlings are best left in their trays until they are approximately 20-50 mm tall before planting out, taking care not to bruise or damage the young taproot.

Nursery-grown plants adapt well to cultivation and respond well to organic and synthetic horticultural fertilizers. Saplings are slow-growing especially when young but growth increases as the tree matures. Growth is also considerably quicker in warmer climates or warmer positions of the garden.

References and further reading

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***Pappea capensis* - Jacket-Plum**

Travel Writer: [EcoTravel Africa](#)

- Sapindaceae - Litchi family SA Tree no 433
- This tree has a wide distribution, easiest found in brackish flats, as it is fairly common near rivers and drainage lines. Also occurring in open woodland, among rocks and often on termite mounds.
- This is a small to medium sized tree, 4 - 10 m, and has a rounded canopy, formed by an intense tangle of short, grey branchlets and twigs. It has an overall dull-green appearance with very visible short, tangled, pale grey branches. The leaves appear to form rosettes at the ends of the drooping branches. Leaves are hard and leathery with a prominent, sunken, pale midrib. Bark is pale grey to brownish and rather smooth.
- Links with animals - While the fruit is eaten by a wide variety of animals and birds, the leaves are unpalatable and are seldom eaten. (The leaves provide a valuable browse for game and stock???????)
- Human uses - The fruit is edible, and tasty and jelly and vinegar are made from it. The seeds contain oil that is used for various purposes. The wood is used for poles, yokes, furniture and spoons. It is claimed that the seeds have several healing properties.

- Gardening - This is an attractive tree that will flourish in most gardens, It grows very well from seed, but is a very slow grower. It is fairly drought-resistant.
- Leaves - Simple, alternate in the older growth and crowded towards the end of the twigs; elliptic with a rounded base and tip, and very variable in size, depending on rainfall. The margins are smooth when mature, but sharply toothed in young leaves. The leaves are leathery, rough, dark olive-green above and pale underneath, with a conspicuous yellow midrib that is visible from both sides. Apex and base rounded ; closely spine-toothed; petiole stout. (5 - 10 x 80 - 160 mm).
- Flowers - Small, pale green, scented flowers are borne in spikes between the leaves. In axillary and terminal, catkin-like racemes; all floral parts in fives; calyx cup-shaped; petals usually 5, sometimes 4 or 6; each petal with 2 hairy scales at the base; stamens 8 to 10, about 4 mm long, reduced in size and sterile in female flowers; ovary 3 chambered, absent in male flowers. Male and female flowers are borne on separate trees, from October to March. (Spikes: 25 - 160 mm).
- Fruit - The velvety-green berry-like fruit is three-lobed and borne in bunches, When ripe they burst open, from December to May, they expose a shiny, bright red jelly covering the black seeds. The dark shells of the fruit may be seen long after the fruit has dropped. (20 mm).

Best places to see the Jacket-Plum in Southern Africa:

The Jacket-Plum is found in the [Kruger National Park](#) in the [Mixed Bushwillow Woodlands](#), [Pretoriuskop Sourveld](#), [Malelane Mountain Bushveld](#), [Sabie Crocodile Thorn Thickets](#), [Thorn Veld](#), [Lebombo Mountain Bushveld](#), [Olifants Rugged Veld](#) & [Mopane Scrubveld](#) ecozones.

- [Tree species of Southern Africa](#) >> Printable Tree List <<
- [South African Trees](#) >> Printable Tree List <<
- [The Plant Kingdom \(Plantae\)](#)
- [Wildlife - Fauna & Flora of Southern Africa](#)

Native:

- **AFRICA**

Northeast Tropical Africa: **Ethiopia; Somalia** [n.]

East Tropical Africa: **Kenya; Tanzania; Uganda**

West-Central Tropical Africa: **Rwanda; Zaire**

South Tropical Africa: **Malawi; Mozambique; Zambia; Zimbabwe**

Southern Africa: **Botswana; Namibia; South Africa - Cape Province, Natal, Transvaal; Swaziland**

