Acacia mearnsii

[Synonyms : *Acacia decurrens* var. *mollis*, *Acacia mollissima*, *Racosperma mearnsii*]

BLACK WATTLE is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to south-eastern Australia it has ball-like fragrant, yellow flowers.

It is also known as Acacia bark, *Akacia* (Swedish), *Akacie* (Danish), Green wattle, *Mearns-Akazie* (German), Mimosa (English, French, Portuguese), *Muthanduku* (Kikuyu), Silver wattle, *Swartwattel* (Afrikaans), Tan wattle, Wattle, and Wattle bark.

The bark cannot be collected from trees younger than seven years old, and then it must be matured for one year before it can be used for medicinal purposes.

Mearnsii commemorates an American Lieutenant Colonel Edgar Alexander Mearns (1856-1916), an army surgeon and naturalist with particular interest in ornithology and mammalogy. He served in the army for about 27 years which included assignments both on the United States-Mexican International Boundary Survey (enabling him to collect 30,000 specimens of flora and fauna now to be found in the United States National Museum of Natural History) and in the Philippines (during which he made further natural history collections). From 1909 to 1910, as a civilian, he was appointed naturalist to the Smithsonian-Roosevelt African Expedition when he explored East Africa.

This is probably one of the most valuable species of all the Australian wattles. It is grown commercially primarily for the tanning industry, particularly in South Africa. Here it was introduced initially as a shade tree but as South America ravaged her stock of quebracho (*Aspidosperma quebracho-blanco*), one of the world's earlier most important sources of tannin, South Africa established large plantations of the fast-growing black wattle trees to plug this breach. Now these trees felled by Zulus are not only a major source of tannin but also provide poles for pit-props, and (supported by other closely related species) much of the world's wood-pulp that is used for textiles, plastics, hardboard and wrapping paper as well. Further north in Kenya the Kikuyu also cultivate black wattle for the tannin in its bark (as much as 54% if the bark is dried when the wattle has been growing in beneficial conditions). It is also grown for its tannin in other parts of Africa, and in India and South America. The rough greyish-brown bark is used for wood adhesives too.

In Sri Lanka black wattle is cultivated as windbreaks and in dense plantations for erosion control (especially on steep slopes of poor soil with gradients up to 50^0). It is used as a green manure and also, as in Africa, provides timber, charcoal and fuel.

The wood has been made into hardboard and has also been used for pit props and parquet flooring.

Unfortunately there is a negative side to black wattle's versatility. Authorities note that in Hawaii and South Africa the tree has become especially invasive – to such an extreme in the latter case that it is referred to as a 'green cancer'.

Medicinally, its bark would appear to have some attributes although these are seldom valued today. In the past herbalists recommended it as an alternative to oak bark (*Quercus*) for treating diarrhoea.