

Erythrophleum suaveolens

[Synonyms : *Afzelia grandis*, *Erythrophleum guineense*, *Erythrophleum giudicale*,
Erythrophleum ordale, *Fillaea suaveolens*]

SASSY BARK TREE is a tree. Native to tropical Africa (particularly Sierra Leone) it has small creamy flowers.

It is also known as Caka bark, Casca bark, Doom bark, Mancona, Mancona bark, Ordeal bark, Red water bark, Redwater tree, Sasswood, Sassy bark, and Saucy bark.

Warning – sassy bark tree is poisonous, particularly the fruit pods, seeds and bark. It affects the central nervous system and apart from other symptoms can cause purging, vomiting and death.

Suaveolens is Latin (fragrant, sweet-smelling) meaning ‘sweet-scented’.

In West Africa the bark has not only been used as an arrow poison but also as an ordeal poison (death determines guilt) chosen at criminal, witchcraft and sorcery trials. Some African tribes inflicted a mass ordeal on all their people annually to ‘remove’ any criminals or sorcerers. Authorities note that tribes living in the region of what is now Ghana used to administer the concentrated extract to anyone accused of witchcraft by placing the poison under the eyelid. The bark extract (red liquid after the bark has been boiled in water) would have been absorbed rapidly through the eye – an irreversible sentence of death without trial. In other parts of the Continent a similar fate could await anyone accused of poisoning or witchcraft but they were required to swallow 4 cut seeds – and their subsequent death proved their guilt while sickness and survival demonstrated innocence.

With regard to hunting game some African tribes contaminated water holes with this red extract as an alternative to shooting their prey with poisoned arrows. It was also used to kill fish, and ground bark mixed with food was laid as a rat poison.

Today the timber is used locally for construction.

Medicinally, the bark has been used in the past not only as a local anaesthetic in dentistry but also to treat dysentery and diarrhoea. Locally one African tribe is said to have used the ground dried bark like a snuff to counter giddiness.