Napoleonaea heudelotii

[Synonyms : *Napoleonaea whitfieldii*]

NAPOLEON'S BUTTON is an evergreen tree. Native to western Africa, it has remarkable double cupped, red and yellow flowers with many stamens.

Warning – the leaves are said to be poisonous.

Heudelotii commemorates a French botanist, Jean Heudelot (1802-1837).

The flower holds centre-stage in a sad story associated with Jean Heudelot. One of his compatriots, Ambroise Palisot Beauvois (1755-1820) had travelled in central Africa and on his return home wrote a book entitled *Flore d'Oware et de Benin*. In this Beauvois included drawings of a tree that he hoped would be called '*Napoleona imperalis*' as the shape of the flowers bears a striking resmblance to that of the royal crowns of France and Italy. However his peers derided him and accused him of extravagant exaggeration and even of trying to curry favour with the Napoleonic régime, charges which hung over him to his death. This must long have rankled with his friends as Antoine de Jussieu (one of that celebrated French family which contained several notable botanists) resolved to try and clear the Beauvois name. In the mid-1830s he assembled an expedition to Africa to find this exotic tree. Heudelot was one of this party on what was destined for him to be his last expedition as he died before it was over. De Jussieu proved to be as good as his word. He located the much disputed exotic plant successfully and returned to France with a dried specimen of it – not only proof of the existence of the species but also evidence of the unusual double-crowned appearance of the tree's flower.

The small ripe warty-skinned, dark orange to reddish-brown fruit are sometimes eaten locally.

Medicinally, the warty fruit skin and/or the bark provide a remedy in some areas of western Africa for treating coughs. Reports also suggest that the fruit pulp has been used in Sierra Leone in treatments for hernia.

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