

*Prunus africana*

[Synonyms : *Pygeum africanum*]

**AFRICAN STINKWOOD** is an evergreen tree. Native to tropical Africa, South Africa and Madagascar it has inconspicuous small white flowers and cherry-sized unpleasant-tasting fruit.

It is also known as Bitter almond, *Mkomohoyo* (Tanzanian), *Mseneo* (Tanzanian), *Mueri* (Kenyan), *Ntasesa* (Ugandan), *Pygeum*, Red stinkwood, *Rooistinkhout* (Afrikaans), and *Tenduet* (Kenyan).

The pale red heartwood turns to deep red upon exposure to air.

The bark is the source of a valuable drug.

*Africana* means ‘of or from Africa’.

The wood has been used locally for making wagons. When durability is not in question, it has also been used for heavy construction work and flooring, as well as for making parts of furniture.

African stinkwood can be found growing along avenues in some urban areas in South Africa and in parks and large gardens.

African tribes in Natal province on the eastern coast of South Africa have long used the tree’s bark to make a tea taken as a treatment for bladder and urinary problems. Today the mature brown bark on older trees is an almost exclusive source of a drug used primarily in Europe to treat prostate problems that can be suffered by as much as 60% of older men – a cure that is not only viewed as safe and natural but also has the advantage of deferring the use of more powerful drugs or recourse to surgery. Amazingly the World Bank’s Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research estimated in a report in 1997 that the annual trade value of this bark could be in the region of US\$150 million dollars if its use was extended worldwide (at the end of the 1990s for instance it was still unfamiliar to most doctors in the United States). The drug was identified by European pharmacologists in the 1970s and export of the bark has provided a valuable income for several tropical countries in the region. Initially harvesting involved removing only a few strips of bark from mature trees and this allowed their recovery. As demand increased however husbandry disappeared over the horizon. The ‘few strips’ developed into a policy of indiscriminate tree felling (or removal of all the bark which comes to the same thing). The immature trees that escaped were/are too young to produce seeds, and the situation has been exacerbated by the destruction of large areas of mountainous forest – not only the tree’s natural habitat but that of other plant and animal life as well. This sorry tale has been enacted not least on the island of Madagascar to the east, and on the main African Continent in Tanzania and Kenya - and on the west African coast in the republic of Cameroon. African stinkwood is now considered officially to be an endangered species. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century attempts are now ongoing to counter past mistakes. For instance in the Cameroon the indiscriminate killing of trees is banned in two mountainous areas and UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) is also looking into the genetic variations of the species found in the wild.. In addition other bodies are turning their attention to the search for practicable methods of cultivating African stinkwood under agroforestry

schemes. (At the time of writing authorities note that initial agroforestry research suggests that the tree's reproduction under farming constraints may not be straightforward.)