

Ficus Sycomorus: Ecological, Cultural, And Medicinal Insights into A Timeless Tree

Eunice Wothaya Muthee*¹, Mathew Ngugi¹, Stephen Gitahi², Alex Machocho¹

¹Department of Biochemistry, Microbiology and Biotechnology, Kenyatta University, Kenya

²Department of Natural Sciences, Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Kenya

ABSTRACT

Ficus sycomorus, commonly known as the sycamore fig, is a large deciduous tree native to tropical and subtropical regions of Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. It plays a crucial ecological role in riparian zones, supporting biodiversity and preventing soil erosion. Historically, the tree has held significant cultural and spiritual importance, particularly in ancient Egypt and various African cultures, where it symbolizes fertility, protection, and nourishment. Medicinally, *Ficus sycomorus* has been utilized for centuries, with various parts of the tree—such as the fruit, leaves, bark, and latex—employed in the treatment of numerous ailments, including gastrointestinal disorders, respiratory issues, wounds, and diabetes. The medicinal properties of the tree are attributed to its rich phytochemical composition, which includes flavonoids, tannins, alkaloids, and phenolic compounds, responsible for its antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, and antidiabetic activities. The anti-inflammatory effects of *Ficus sycomorus*, in particular, have been highlighted in scientific studies, demonstrating its potential in managing chronic inflammatory diseases through mechanisms such as the inhibition of pro-inflammatory cytokines, enzymes, and oxidative stress. Despite threats from habitat destruction, the tree's resilience and ongoing cultural and medicinal relevance underscore the importance of its conservation and further research. This paper explores the ecological, cultural, and medicinal significance of *Ficus sycomorus*, highlighting its multifaceted contributions to both nature and human well-being.

Keywords: *Ficus sycomorus*, Ecological significance, Cultural importance, Medicinal properties, Anti-inflammatory activity

INTRODUCTION

Ficus sycomorus, commonly known as the sycamore fig, is a large deciduous tree native to the tropical and subtropical regions of Africa, the Mediterranean, and parts of the Middle East. It belongs to the *Moraceae* family, which includes other notable species like the common fig (*Ficus carica*) and the rubber plant (*Ficus elastica*). This species, with its vast historical and cultural importance, plays a pivotal ecological role and is of significant medicinal and practical value to the communities that utilize it.

Botanical Description

Ficus sycomorus is a robust tree that can grow up to 20 meters in height, with a broad canopy often extending to over 15 meters in diameter. The tree's

trunk is fluted and rough, covered with a grayish bark that becomes more fissured with age. It has an extensive root system, which allows it to thrive in a variety of soil types, including poor and arid soils (Keller, 2014). The tree's large, dark green, ovate leaves, reaching up to 30 cm in length, are alternately arranged and possess a distinctive glossy texture on the upper surface, with a paler, hairy underside. One of the most striking features of the sycamore fig is its syconium, a unique structure that contains numerous small flowers. This fleshy, pear-shaped fruit begins as green and turns reddish or yellowish when ripe, depending on the variety (Nahon, 2012). The fruit is edible, though not as sweet as other fig varieties, and is consumed in various forms, such as fresh or dried, and used to make jams or jellies. Unlike typical fruits, the syconium is a collective of tiny flowers that mature inside a receptacle.

Relevant conflicts of interest/financial disclosures: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.





Ficus sycomorus

Ecological Role

In its native habitats, *Ficus sycomorus* plays an essential role in supporting biodiversity. The tree is particularly well-suited to riparian zones, thriving along rivers, streams, and in woodlands. Its deep root system helps prevent soil erosion, making it valuable in maintaining the integrity of riverbanks and other flood-prone areas (Campbell et al., 2014). Furthermore, the sycamore fig is a keystone species in many ecosystems, providing food and shelter for a variety of animals, including primates, birds, and insects. Species such as baboons, elephants, and birds depend on its fruit for sustenance (Williams et al., 2018). Its ecological value extends beyond its role as a food source. The dense canopy offers shade and protection for many smaller plants and animals, and its leaves and bark are vital in the maintenance of local soil fertility, enriching the soil with organic matter (Jansen et al., 2014).

Cultural and Historical Significance

Historically, *Ficus sycomorus* has been revered for its cultural and spiritual significance. In ancient Egypt, the sycamore fig was considered a sacred tree, associated with fertility and life. It was believed to symbolize nourishment and protection. The tree was often planted in temple gardens and around sacred sites, signifying its importance in Egyptian culture (Johnson, 2011). The sycamore fig also appears in various religious texts, including the Bible. The story of Zacchaeus, a biblical figure, mentions his climbing of a sycamore tree to see Jesus (Luke 19:1-10), further cementing the tree's place in the cultural imagination.

In many African communities, the sycamore fig is planted near homes and villages, providing not only physical shade but also symbolic protection. Its long-lasting presence in folklore and mythology highlights its role as a provider of sustenance and a cultural touchstone (Hassan, 2013).

Conservation and Threats

Despite its widespread distribution, *Ficus sycomorus* faces potential threats from habitat destruction due to deforestation and agricultural expansion. The loss of riparian habitats can limit its ability to thrive, as it is most commonly found along rivers and watercourses (Campbell et al., 2014). However, the tree's resilience to drought and ability to grow in a variety of environments make it relatively adaptable and capable of withstanding many environmental pressures. Nonetheless, conservation efforts are necessary to preserve its role in ecosystems, particularly in regions where riparian zones are increasingly threatened by human activity.

Medicinal Uses

The medicinal properties of *Ficus sycomorus* have long been recognized in traditional medicine. Various parts of the tree, including the leaves, bark, and fruit, are used to treat a wide range of ailments. The fruit, rich in carbohydrates, vitamins (especially Vitamin C), and minerals, is consumed as a nutritional supplement in regions where food security is an issue (Sena et al., 2017). The latex of the tree has antiseptic properties and is used in treating wounds and infections. In traditional African medicine, the leaves are employed in the treatment of gastrointestinal disorders, respiratory conditions, and even as a

remedy for fever (Jansen et al., 2014). The medicinal properties of *Ficus sycomorus* are attributed to its rich phytochemical composition, which includes flavonoids, alkaloids, tannins, and phenolic compounds. These compounds contribute to the tree's antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, and antidiabetic activities.

1. Gastrointestinal Disorders:

In traditional African medicine, *Ficus sycomorus* is often used to treat gastrointestinal problems such as dysentery, diarrhea, and constipation. The fruit of the sycamore fig, which is rich in fiber, is considered to have soothing properties that help regulate digestive function. Additionally, the latex and bark have been used in folk medicine to treat stomach ulcers and relieve indigestion (Sena et al., 2017). The anti-inflammatory and antibacterial properties of the tree are believed to aid in alleviating gastrointestinal discomfort and promoting overall gut health.

3. Respiratory Issues

The leaves and bark of *Ficus sycomorus* have also been traditionally used to treat respiratory conditions, including coughs, bronchitis, and asthma. The plant's expectorant properties are thought to help loosen mucus in the lungs and promote easier breathing. In some African cultures, the leaves are boiled and used as a steam inhalation remedy to clear the airways and alleviate symptoms of respiratory infections (Sena et al., 2017). Additionally, the tree's latex has been utilized as a remedy for chest congestion.

4. Wound Healing and Skin Care

The latex of *Ficus sycomorus* has antiseptic and antimicrobial properties, making it an effective treatment for wounds, cuts, and burns. It is often applied topically to promote healing and prevent infection. In traditional medicine, the latex is also used to treat skin conditions such as eczema, fungal infections, and boils (Jansen et al., 2014). The antibacterial properties of the latex make it particularly useful in cleansing wounds and promoting faster recovery.

5. Antidiabetic Effects

Ficus sycomorus has shown promise in managing diabetes, particularly type 2 diabetes. Several studies have indicated that extracts of the leaves and fruit possess significant antidiabetic properties. These effects are attributed to the plant's ability to regulate blood glucose levels by enhancing insulin sensitivity and reducing the absorption of glucose in the intestines (Sena et al., 2017). Traditional healers often use decoctions made from the leaves or fruit to manage symptoms of diabetes. The fruit is also rich in antioxidants, which can help mitigate the complications associated with diabetes, such as oxidative damage to the organs.

6. Antimicrobial and Antifungal Properties

Ficus sycomorus has demonstrated notable antimicrobial and antifungal properties in various studies. The leaf and bark extracts have been found to be effective against a range of pathogens, including bacteria and fungi (Sena et al., 2017). These properties make the plant useful in treating infections, particularly in the skin and mucous membranes. The antimicrobial effects are attributed to the presence of tannins, flavonoids, and alkaloids, which have been shown to inhibit the growth of various microorganisms.

7. Fever and Pain Relief

In some African communities, the leaves and bark of *Ficus sycomorus* are used to treat fever and provide general pain relief. The plant's analgesic and antipyretic properties make it useful in managing symptoms of fever, especially those caused by infections or inflammatory conditions. A decoction of the bark or leaves is commonly consumed to bring down high body temperatures and relieve general body pain (Keller, 2014).

8. Antioxidant and Cardiovascular Health

The antioxidant effects of *Ficus sycomorus* contribute to cardiovascular health by preventing oxidative damage to blood vessels and reducing the risk of atherosclerosis (plaque buildup in arteries). Studies have shown that the tree's extracts help improve blood circulation and may reduce high blood pressure, contributing to overall heart health (Williams et al., 2018). The flavonoids and polyphenolic compounds

found in the leaves and fruit are thought to be responsible for these beneficial cardiovascular effects.

9. Use in Traditional Remedies for Fertility

In various African cultures, *Ficus sycomorus* has been traditionally used as a fertility booster. Infusions made from the leaves or bark are believed to support reproductive health and are used by women experiencing difficulty in conceiving. Some traditional beliefs suggest that the tree's association with life and fertility in spiritual contexts contributes to its reputation as a fertility-enhancing remedy (Hassan, 2013).

Anti-inflammatory Activity

Inflammation is a complex biological response to harmful stimuli such as pathogens, damaged cells, or irritants, and it is an essential part of the body's immune system. However, chronic inflammation is associated with the development of various diseases, including arthritis, cardiovascular diseases, and neurodegenerative disorders. As a result, anti-inflammatory agents are of significant interest in medicinal research, particularly those derived from natural sources. *Ficus sycomorus*, also known as the sycamore fig, has demonstrated notable anti-inflammatory properties through various bioactive compounds present in its leaves, fruit, and bark. This discussion aims to explore the anti-inflammatory activity of *Ficus sycomorus* in detail, focusing on the phytochemical components responsible for this activity and the mechanisms through which they exert their effects.

Phytochemical Composition of *Ficus sycomorus* Related to Anti-inflammatory Activity

The anti-inflammatory properties of *Ficus sycomorus* are primarily attributed to its rich composition of bioactive compounds, including flavonoids, tannins, phenolic acids, and alkaloids. These compounds have been shown to exert significant anti-inflammatory effects by modulating various molecular pathways involved in the inflammatory response.

1. Flavonoids: Flavonoids are a group of polyphenolic compounds known for their potent

antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties. In *Ficus sycomorus*, flavonoids such as quercetin, kaempferol, and rutin have been identified in the leaves and fruit. These compounds inhibit the release of pro-inflammatory cytokines like tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF- α) and interleukins (IL-1 β , IL-6), which play central roles in the inflammation process (Keller, 2014). By modulating these cytokines, flavonoids can reduce the intensity and duration of inflammation.

2. Tannins: Tannins, which are polyphenolic compounds found in the bark and leaves of *Ficus sycomorus*, have been shown to possess significant anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. They act by scavenging free radicals and reducing oxidative stress, which is a critical factor in the initiation and progression of inflammatory responses. Tannins also interfere with the activity of enzymes such as cyclooxygenase (COX) and lipoxygenase (LOX), which are involved in the production of pro-inflammatory mediators like prostaglandins and leukotrienes (Sena et al., 2017).

3. Phenolic Acids: Phenolic compounds, particularly phenolic acids like gallic acid and ellagic acid, have been identified in various parts of the *Ficus sycomorus* tree. These compounds are known to inhibit the activation of inflammatory signaling pathways, including the nuclear factor-kappa B (NF- κ B) pathway, which is a major regulator of the inflammatory response. By inhibiting NF- κ B, these phenolic compounds help reduce the expression of genes responsible for the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines and enzymes.

4. Alkaloids: The presence of alkaloids in *Ficus sycomorus*, especially in the bark, adds to its anti-inflammatory properties. Alkaloids such as quassine and ficusin have been shown to exhibit anti-inflammatory effects by reducing the synthesis of inflammatory mediators like prostaglandins and by decreasing the activity of inflammatory enzymes (Jansen et al., 2014).

Mechanisms of Anti-inflammatory Activity

The anti-inflammatory activity of *Ficus sycomorus* is mediated through several mechanisms at the molecular and cellular levels. These include:

1. Inhibition of Pro-inflammatory Cytokines:

One of the primary mechanisms through which *Ficus sycomorus* exerts its anti-inflammatory effects is by reducing the levels of pro-inflammatory cytokines such as TNF- α , IL-1 β , and IL-6. These cytokines are key mediators of the inflammatory response and are involved in the activation of various signaling pathways that lead to inflammation. Studies have shown that extracts of *Ficus sycomorus*, particularly from the leaves and bark, can significantly decrease the expression and secretion of these cytokines, thereby alleviating inflammation (Sena et al., 2017).

2. Inhibition of Cyclooxygenase (COX) and Lipoxygenase (LOX):

COX and LOX are enzymes that play critical roles in the production of prostaglandins and leukotrienes, respectively. These molecules are key mediators of inflammation, pain, and fever. The bark and leaves of *Ficus sycomorus* have been shown to inhibit the activity of both COX and LOX, thereby reducing the synthesis of these pro-inflammatory mediators (Keller, 2014). This inhibition results in a decrease in pain, swelling, and other signs of inflammation.

3. Regulation of the NF- κ B Pathway:

The NF- κ B signaling pathway is a central regulator of inflammation. It controls the expression of numerous genes involved in the inflammatory process, including those that encode for cytokines, chemokines, and adhesion molecules. *Ficus sycomorus* has been shown to inhibit the activation of NF- κ B, thereby reducing the transcription of pro-inflammatory genes (Jansen et al., 2014). This suppression of NF- κ B activity is one of the key mechanisms by which the plant reduces inflammation and prevents the chronic activation of the immune response.

4. Antioxidant Activity:

Oxidative stress, which results from an imbalance between the production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and the body's antioxidant defenses, is a significant contributor

to inflammation. The antioxidant compounds found in *Ficus sycomorus*, such as flavonoids and phenolic acids, scavenge ROS and reduce oxidative stress, thereby preventing the activation of inflammatory pathways (Keller, 2014). By protecting cells from oxidative damage, these compounds help to prevent chronic inflammation and the development of related diseases.

5. Modulation of Immune Cell Activation:

Inflammation is mediated by the activation of various immune cells, including macrophages, neutrophils, and T lymphocytes. *Ficus sycomorus* has been shown to inhibit the activation and migration of these immune cells to sites of inflammation. This is particularly important in conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis, where excessive immune cell activation leads to tissue damage and chronic inflammation (Sena et al., 2017). By modulating immune cell function, *Ficus sycomorus* helps to control and reduce inflammation.

Scientific Evidence Supporting Anti-inflammatory Activity

Several scientific studies have investigated the anti-inflammatory effects of *Ficus sycomorus*. In one study, an aqueous extract of the leaves was shown to significantly reduce the swelling and erythema (redness) induced by carrageenan in rats, a standard animal model of acute inflammation. The study reported that the extract exerted these effects by inhibiting the production of inflammatory mediators such as prostaglandins and cytokines (Sena et al., 2017). Another study demonstrated that the bark extract of *Ficus sycomorus* could reduce the activity of COX and LOX enzymes, which resulted in lower levels of pro-inflammatory prostaglandins and leukotrienes. This study also showed that the plant's extract reduced the levels of TNF- α and IL-6, further confirming its anti-inflammatory potential (Jansen et al., 2014).

CONCLUSION

Ficus sycomorus, the sycamore fig, is a remarkable tree with a rich ecological, cultural, and medicinal legacy. Its significant role in maintaining biodiversity, especially in riparian zones, and its deep cultural

connections to various communities, particularly in Africa and the Mediterranean, demonstrate its profound impact. As a keystone species, the sycamore fig sustains numerous organisms and helps prevent soil erosion, highlighting its environmental importance. Medically, *Ficus sycomorus* has been used for centuries in traditional medicine, offering a wide array of therapeutic benefits, from treating gastrointestinal disorders and respiratory issues to alleviating pain and promoting wound healing. The tree's rich phytochemical composition—containing flavonoids, tannins, alkaloids, and phenolic acids—contributes to its diverse medicinal properties, including anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, and antidiabetic effects. The tree's anti-inflammatory properties, in particular, stand out due to its ability to modulate several molecular pathways involved in inflammation. Through the inhibition of pro-inflammatory cytokines, enzymes like COX and LOX, and the NF- κ B signaling pathway, *Ficus sycomorus* provides promising therapeutic potential for managing chronic inflammatory conditions. The plant's antioxidant activity further supports its role in reducing oxidative stress and preventing related diseases. Despite facing threats from habitat destruction and deforestation, *Ficus sycomorus* remains a resilient species, adaptable to a variety of environments. Its importance in both the natural world and human societies underscores the need for its conservation and continued study, particularly in exploring its medicinal properties and potential applications in modern healthcare. In conclusion, *Ficus sycomorus* is not only an ecologically vital tree but also a key player in traditional and modern medicine, demonstrating a timeless relevance that bridges nature, culture, and science.

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HOW TO CITE: Eunice Wothaya Muthee*, Mathew Ngugi, Stephen Gitahi, Alex Machocho, *Ficus Sycomorus: Ecological, Cultural, And Medicinal Insights into A Timeless Tree*, Int. J. Sci. R. Tech., 2025, 2 (4), 342-347. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15236250>