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Biodiversity for Life
South African National Biodiversity Institute

2025 TREES OF THE YEAR

Sideroxylon inerme L. subsp. *inerme*



Family: Sapotaceae
National tree number: 579
Common names: white-milkwood (English); *witmelkhout* (Afrikaans); *emaselitfole* (siSwati); *muṱaladzi-vhufa* (Tshivenda); *ximafana* (isiXhosa); *umakhwelafingqane* (isiZulu)

Evergreen, up to 18 m high, with dense rounded crown. Bark smooth, becoming rough, grey-brown to black, with rectangular cracks revealing red underbark. Young branches smooth or covered with fine hairs. Leaves spirally arranged, smooth, leathery, shiny dark green above, dull below; soft hairs present on young leaves. Flowers small, greenish white with strong, unpleasant smell. Fruits small, round, fleshy, purple black, containing milky latex.







Attracts birds · Attracts insects · Requires lots of water · Drought-resistant · Requires full sun · Semi shade · Half frost hardy · Evergreen · Useful wood · Protected

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General appearance

Evergreen tree up to 10 m high, occasionally up to 15 m high; crown large, dense, rounded. Bark initially smooth, becoming rough, grey-brown to black, with rectangular cracks through which the red underbark is visible. Young branches smooth or covered with fine hairs. Leaves spirally arranged around twigs, smooth with soft hairs on young leaves, leathery, exuding milky latex when broken, glossy dark green above, dull below, 40–120 × 20–50 mm; midrib yellow-green and visible on both sides. Flowers few to numerous, unpleasantly scented, small, green-white, up to 4 mm long, on lower stems or stems where leaves have fallen. Flowering time: October to April. Fruit single-seeded berries with short crown of persistent style, small, round, fleshy, purple-black, containing milky latex, 12 mm in diameter; fruiting time from February to September. Seed up to 6 mm in diameter.

Distribution and habitat

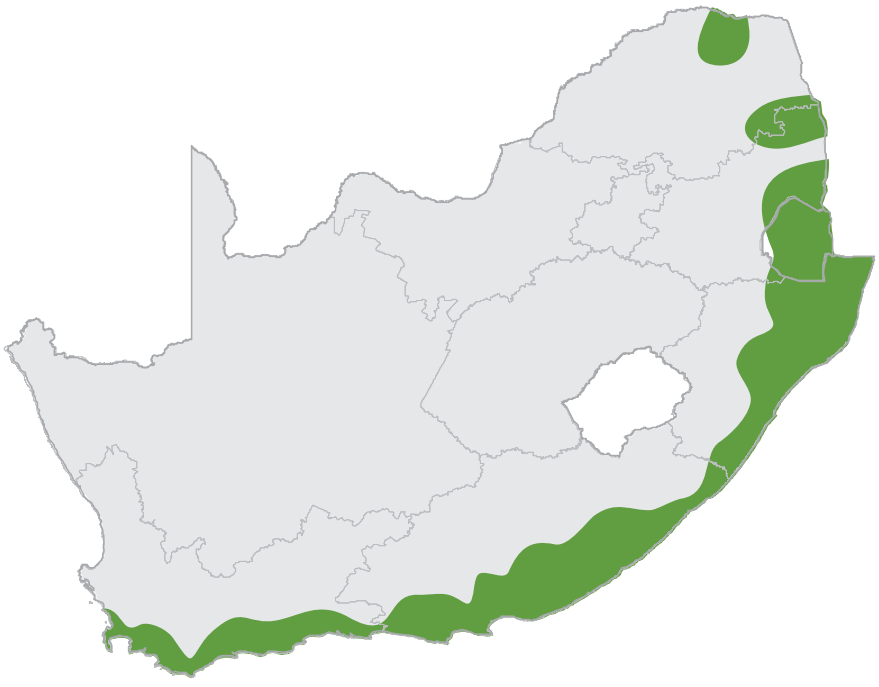
Sideroxylon is a small genus found in Africa, America and Asia with only one species occurring in South Africa. It is a protected species in South Africa, commonly found in coastal woodlands, dune forests and littoral forests along seashores. Although mainly a coastal species, it can also grow inland up to 2 000 m a.s.l., often associated with termite mounds. In South Africa it occurs in Limpopo, Mpumalanga, KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape and Western Cape, as well as Eswatini and southern Mozambique. The famous, 600-year-old Post Office Tree in Mossel Bay is a *Sideroxylon inerme*. In 1501 a Portuguese sailor hid a letter, detailing an account of the disaster that left him shipwrecked, in an old shoe, which he tied to the branches of this tree.

Meaning of name

Sideros means ‘iron’ and *xylon* means ‘wood’, in reference to the hardness of the wood. The specific epithet *inerme* means ‘unarmed’, in reference to the tree’s lack of spines.

Ecology and uses

- The tree is known for its fire resistance and durable wood, its timber is used for fence poles, boats and good firewood.
- Bark extracts may have skin-lightning properties, whereas the bark and roots have medicinal properties and are used to cure broken bones, treat fevers, dispel bad dreams and in treating gall sickness in stock.
- Leaves are eaten by nyala and kudu; flowers attract bees and are eaten by Speckled Mousebirds.
- Fruits are eaten by monkeys, bushpigs, bats and various fruit-eating birds.



As a garden tree

The white-milkwood can be propagated from both seed and cuttings. Cuttings should be taken from semi matured shoots, placed in mist units with bottom heating, where they typically root between 6 and 8 weeks. After rooting, seedlings should be hardened off before being potted in a well-drained soil mix. Fleshy parts should be removed from ripe seed before they are sown in seedling trays with sandy loam soil, preferably in summer. Trays should be kept moist and in a warm place, and seeds should take 4–6 weeks to germinate. Trees grow best in warm coastal regions with good rainfall, in full sun and semi shade. They can withstand extended dry periods and nutrient-poor sandy soil. They are adaptable and able to thrive in clay, sandy loam and even saline conditions. Adding generous amounts of compost to sandy soil and occasional feeding will give trees a strong start. They are sensitive to direct sea winds and should be planted behind a windbreak to avoid salt-burn damage. Trees often function as effective firebreaks.