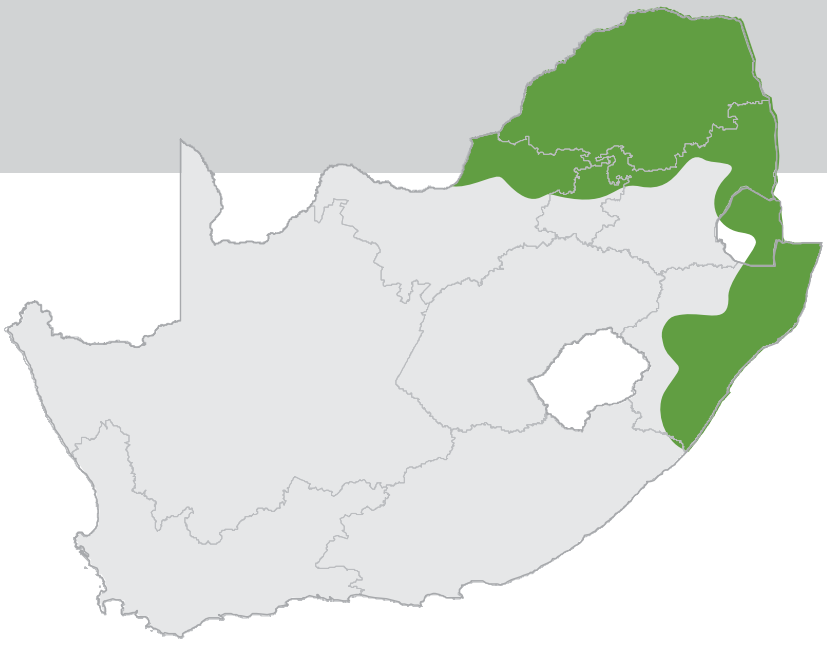
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South African National Biodiversity Institute

2025 TREES OF THE YEAR

Spirostachys africana Sond.



Family: Euphorbiaceae
National tree number: 341
Common names: tamboti (English); *tambotie* (Afrikaans); *morekuri* (Sepedi); *umtfombotsi* (siSwati); *ndzopfori* (Xitsonga); *morukuru* (Setswana); *muonze* (Tshivenda); *umthombothi* (isiZulu)

Medium to large tree, up to 18 m high, with dense, round crown. Bark dark grey to black, rectangular, in longitudinal rows. Branches reddish brown, flaking; twigs with lenticels. Leaves alternately arranged, leathery, smooth to slightly hairy; young leaves reddish and folded along midrib, maturing to dull green, turning bright yellow before falling. Female and male flowers are produced on the same plant. Flowers in spikes on unbranched stalks, emerging before or with new leaves, tiny; male flowers numerous and appear golden due to pollen; female flowers few, red. Flowering time: August to September. Fruit three-lobed capsule, yellow-brown, opening with an explosive sound on hot summer days when ripe; produced from October to February.



Attracts birds · Attracts insects · Requires lots of water · Frost-resistant · Medicinal use · Useful wood

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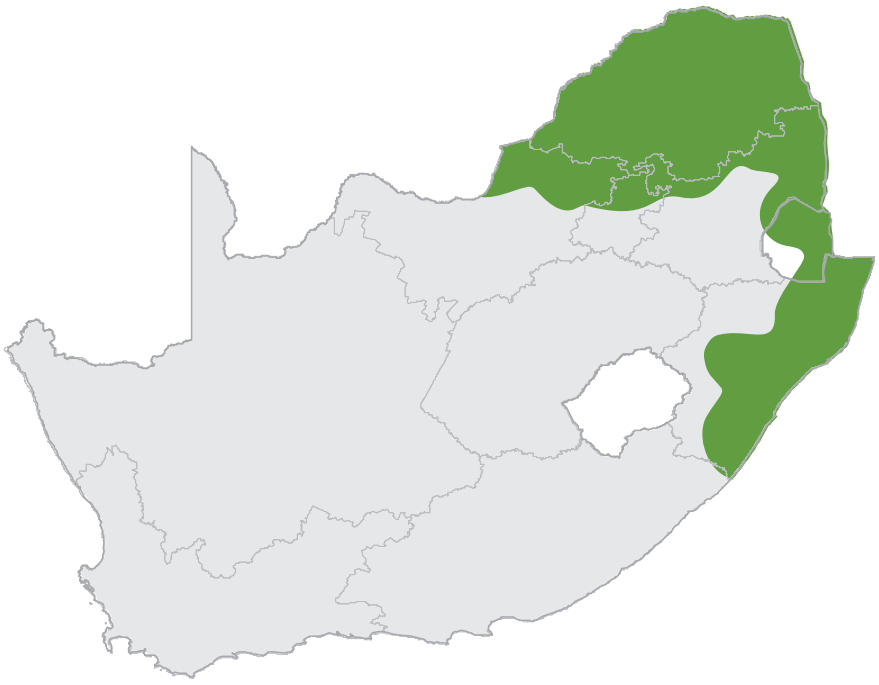
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General appearance

Medium to large tree up to 10 m high, occasionally up to 18 m high; crown dense, round. Young trees pale and much branched; branches reddish brown, flaking and twigs with lenticels. Bark rectangular in longitudinal rows, dark grey to black. Leaves alternately arranged, reddish and folded along midrib when young, becoming leathery, smooth or slightly hairy, dull green turning bright yellow before falling; midrib prominent below and clearly visible above. Female and male flowers are produced on the same plant. Flowers in spikes of up to 35 mm long on unbranched stalks, emerging before or with new leaves, tiny; male flowers numerous and appear golden due to pollen; female flowers few, red. Flowering time: August to September. Fruit three-lobed capsules, 6 × 13 mm, maturing to yellow-brown and opening with an explosive sound on hot summer days, from October to February. Seeds 7 mm wide. The tamboti is one of the so-called jumping bean trees – seeds become infested with larvae of a small grey moth, which can cause seeds to 'jump' up several centimetres.



Distribution and habitat

Trees are common in warm woodlands, bushveld and savanna, in watercourses along rivers, seasonal streams and poorly drained soils. Tamboti occurs in all Southern African countries (except Lesotho); in South Africa it can be found in Limpopo, North West, Gauteng, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal.

Meaning of name

Spirostachys means 'spiral flower spikes' and *africana* is in reference to it being from Africa.

Ecology and uses

- The wood is beautiful and used to manufacture furniture. However, it cannot be used as a cooking fuel, as smoke from the coals is toxic and eating food roasted on them will result in diarrhoea. Furthermore, sawdust from the wood is harmful to the eyes and can cause blindness. The wood is termite- and borer-proof, and used as an insect repellent.
- Toxic milky latex exudes from all parts of the tree and can cause serious skin blisters and eye irritation.
- Bark is used to treat stomach pains, but large doses will cause damage to internal organs.
- Leaves are consumed by kudu and other antelope, rhino, elephant and monkeys particularly in winter; bark is consumed by porcupines and fruits are eaten by francolins, guineafowl and doves.

As a garden tree

Trees can be propagated from seed and cutting. Seeds should be collected before they fall to avoid parasitism by insects. Sow shallowly in containers with river sand and keep moist. It's a slow-growing plant and should be planted at least 4 m away from walls.