Olea europaea subsp. *cuspidata* (*O. africana*) Oleaceae

Indigenous

STANDARD/TRADE NAMES: Brown olive, Wild olive.

COMMON NAMES: **Boran:** Ejarse; **English:** African wild olive; **Kamba:** Muthata; **Keiyo:** Yemit; **Kikuyu:** Mutamaiyu; **Kipsigis:** Emitiot; **Luhya (Bukusu):** Kumunyubuti; **Luo:** Kang'o; **Maasai:** Oloirien, Olorien; **Marakwet:** Yemit; **Meru:** Muthata, Mutero; **Nandi:** Emidit; **Ogiek:** Yemdit; **Sabaot:** Yemit; **Samburu:** Tamiyai; **Somali:** Wera; **Taita:** Mkumbi; **Tugen:** Yemit; **Turkana:** Euriepei.

DESCRIPTION: An evergreen tree to 15 m, with a rounded crown and grey-green foliage, trunk often crooked.
BARK: Rough grey to dark brown, longitudinally fissured, **branchlets white, dotted with breathing pores.**
LEAVES: Stiff, **narrowly oval, sharply pointed, in opposite pairs,** glossy dark-green above, **underside pale to white or golden,** the midrib prominent, to 8 cm.
FLOWERS: Small, white to cream, in branched heads to 5 cm arising laterally on the branches or terminally.
FRUIT: **Oval, with a pointed tip, fleshy, to 1 cm,** purple and bitter–sweet when ripe.

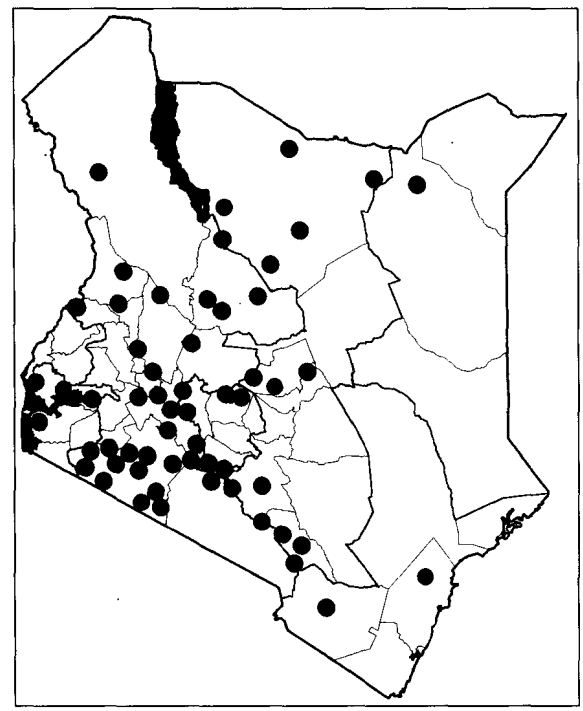
ECOLOGY: Found from Ethiopia to southern Africa, also on the Arabian peninsula and to India and China. In Kenya, found in most inland highland areas from Taita Hills to west and northern Kenya. Common in dry *Olea–Juniperus–Podocarpus* forests and forest margins, 950–2,500 m. Found on rocky hillsides, forest margins and along dry riverbeds, where it may occasionally form a pure stand. Does best in good forest soil, but once established, can withstand poor soils with little moisture. Agroclimatic Zones II–III.

USES: Firewood, charcoal (for cleaning calabashes), timber (house construction), furniture, poles, posts, flooring, panelling, carvings, utensils, clubs, walking sticks, seasoning (fermentation and flavouring milk), edible fruit, soup, medicine (stem, bark), bee forage, shade, ornamental, windbreak, ceremonial, toothbrushes.

PROPAGATION: Wildings, seedlings (difficult to raise).

SEED: A poor seeder; about 14,000 seeds per kg. Low germination rate; 20%, rarely higher, in 20–45 days. The collection should be done immediately after the fruit turns to purplish black because of the competition by birds. After collection, spread out in a thin layer for 2–3 days to ripen. Pulp should be separated from seed by rubbing and cleaning in running water, then dry seed for storage or sow immediately. It is also possible to collect depulped seeds from the ground.
treatment: Soak dried seed in cold water for 48 hours. Alternatively, crack the seed cover, but taking care not to damage the seed.
storage: Seed can be stored for some time at room temperature, but best to use fresh seed.

MANAGEMENT: Slow growing; pruning, thinning where necessary, pollarding.



Olea europaea subsp. *cuspidata* (cont)

REMARKS: This tree has one of the heaviest woods known. It is popular with the Maasai for making *rungu* (clubs). The poles are strong and are used to support the heavy earth roofs of traditional Maasai houses. The charcoal is used for cleaning calabashes and the sticks for smoking milk gourds. Burning branches are used for flavouring soup and giving it a nice smell. It is an important ceremonial tree among the Maasai. As is the case with the ancient 'olive branch' of peace, they burn green branches in all ceremonies for blessings, peace and good luck. This is the most valuable firewood plant. It burns easily and brightly, giving a good scent. Because of its evergreen nature, the tree provides excellent shade. Fruit have a thin mesocarp and therefore are not used to produce olive oil. *Olea europaea* is a complex of several subspecies and varieties. Subsp. *europaea* is the large-fruited type found in the Mediterranean region from which the olive oil widely used in cooking is extracted. The fruits are also preserved and eaten. Olives have been in cultivation in the Middle East for over 5,000 years.

FURTHER READING: http://www.worldagroforestrycentre.org/Sites/TreeDBS/AFT/AFT.htm; Albrecht, 1993; Backes and Ahenda, 1998; Beentje, 1994; Bein et al., 1996; Bekele-Tesemma et al., 1993; Dharani, 2002; Katende et al., 1995; Kokwaro, 1993; Palgrave and Palgrave, 2002; van Wyk, 1993; Verheij and Coronel, 1991; Mbuya et al., 1994.