Introduction

_Elaeodendron croceum_ is an attractive, evergreen tree with a neat, upright shape which can with care be cultivated in gardens large and small.

Description

This evergreen tree is medium to tall with a neat, upright shape. The bark is grayish, with a conspicuous layer of a powdery yellow pigment in the freshly exposed bark. Branches are grayish brown with prominent, coarse black lenticels. Leaves are opposite, hard and leathery with the venation inconspicuous, lamina elliptic, dark green, between 15 mm to over 200 mm long; the base and apex are sharp-pointed, the margin is prominently spine-tipped, especially on young shoots; the petiole is 4-10 mm long with a small triangular stipule.
The inflorescences are tiny; consisting of 3 to 15 flowers. Flowers are in four parts, about 3 mm in diameter. Sepals and petals are green and white respectively and with an ovate shape. The stamens are erect to spreading, on a 0.5 mm short filament. A flat, prominent disc surrounds the 2-locular, round ovary, with an inconspicuous style and stigma. The fruit is cream-coloured, 20 to 30 mm long, and the small seed is enclosed by a hard, pointed stone or putamen, like that of an olive.

The Celastraceae is a large and rather diverse family distributed in the tropical and temperate zones of the world. Most of its species have been subject to considerable nomenclatural confusion and name changes. Since the species was described by Carl Peter Thunberg (1794) as *Ilex crocea*, it has been treated under several species names within *Elaeodendron* or *Cassine*. The common names have also been a source of confusion.

Thunberg encountered the species near the Grootvadersbosch near Swellendam in October 1774. He described the species as follows: 'Yellow wood (Geelhout, *Ilex crocea*) is of a yellow colour, almost like box, of a close texture, and handsome. It is used for planks and beams in the construction of houses, for tables, doors, cupboards, window frames, and butter churns'. His description of the wood is entirely correct but it is probably not as widely used as the yellowwood derived from the two species of *Podocarpus* also present in the Grootvadersbosch (with the possible exception of butter churns that have been reported as being made from wood of *Elaeodendron croceum*). This forest was an important source of timber for Cape Town at the time but Thunberg evidently confused the uses of this yellow wood with that of *Podocarpus* species.

The common names recorded by Thunberg are reflected in his name: croceum means 'saffron yellow'. This colour is present as bright yellow pigment in the bark of many species of the family Celastraceae, including *Elaeodendron croceum*. Ecklon & Zeyher (1834) gave a literal translation of saffron wood when they proposed the synonymous generic name *Crocoxylon*. Other names that are synonyms for *Elaeodendron croceum* include: *Crocoxylon excelsum*; *Cassine crocea*, *Elaeodendron capense* and until recently *Cassine papillosa*.

The name of the genus *Elaeodendron* is derived from the Mauritius tree, Bois d'Olive (or olive tree), after the resemblance of the fruit to the true olive was noted by the first scientist collecting this tree.

This species grows easily from seed and from cuttings, but is usually not a fast grower. If the stone covering of the seed is not removed or broken, germination can take anything from 12 to 30 months. Young plants tend to grow very slowly or remain straggly for a long period, but this could be an adaptation to forest conditions where sun and space are limited. Once a space is created by an old fallen tree, the young seedlings can take its place.