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Combretum bracteosum | Plantz Africa

Introduction

The *Combretum bracteosum* is unique amongst our bushwillows in that it does not have the characteristic, papery, four-winged fruit which is familiar to many people. The fruit, instead, is a hard, round nut. It also does have something to do with hiccups! Some say it causes them, others that it is a cure for hiccups. **(It also may be harmful, so it is not something to be experimented with.)**



Description

Description

The hiccup nut is usually a shrub or small tree which scrambles into nearby vegetation. It grows up to between 2 and 4 m high, although if it has support from other trees it can reach up to 8 m. It spreads to between 4 and 5 m wide. Denzil Carr (1988) noted that the shrub is multistemmed, dense, and has unbranched stems which emerge from the top of the main crown. These have a sinuous appearance and when they touch another object which may offer support, they coil around it. Some of the stems are armed with curved spines. The leaves are simple and can be opposite, alternate or whorled, depending on where they are on the plant. The side veins of the leaves do not reach the margin (edge) of the leaf and loop into the side vein in front of it. The leaves are dark green in colour although very new leaves may have a purple tinge. Autumn colours are a reddish purple.





Flowering takes place in late spring (September, October) although it may flower later. The flowers are brilliant orange-red and clustered into inflorescences. Flowering is profuse and creates a striking display. The fruit (\pm 20 mm across) appears between late summer and autumn (December to March) and is green, ripening to reddish brown; it is almost spherical and does not have wings, although it may be slightly 5-angled. It is a true nut in that it has a hard outer shell.

Distribution and habitat

Distribution description

Combretum bracteosum is found naturally along the coast in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape. It grows in sand close to the sea, favouring dune forest and riverine forest (and their margins). Apparently it is very occasionally found somewhat inland from the sea, usually at low altitude and growing in sand. Its natural habitat is generally frost-free and with a reasonably high annual rainfall.

The family Combretaceae contains 20 genera around the world. Gardeners from warmer areas may know the exotic, sweetly scented Rangoon creeper, *Quisqualis indica*, which is also in this family. There are 250 species of *Combretum* worldwide in areas with warm climates, although not in Australia and the Pacific Islands. Approximately 30 of these occur in southern Africa.

Derivation of name and historical aspects

History

The name *Combretum* is derived from the word used by Pliny (a Roman writer on natural history dating from 23 to 79 AD) for a climbing plant; *bracteosum* refers to the bracts found at the base of the individual flower stalks. Meg Coates Palgrave (2002) writes that some botanists feel that this plant may in fact belong in another genus.

Ecology

Ecology

The hiccup nut is a host plant for the Striped Policeman butterfly, *Coeliades forestan*, which has a very strikingly marked caterpillar, yellowish white with dark brown to black stripes and an orange head. The adult is predominately brown and white with a striped abdomen.

Uses

Use

The roasted nuts are apparently eaten. There is confusion regarding its use medicinally - some references

say that it is recorded as being used to cure hiccups, others that it causes them. Watt & Breyer-Brandwijk (1932), report that the plant does contain a toxic substance, saponin.

Growing Combretum bracteosum

Grow

The spectacular blaze of flowers make *Combretum bracteosum* a sought-after plant, especially in medium to large gardens (remember it can reach 5 m in diameter!). Although its natural habitat is in a warm climate, Denzil Carr writes that he grew the hiccup nut fairy successfully on the highveld but comments that it will need a good supply of water to really grow well. It apparently was not damaged by frost, although he does not say whether the plant was protected in any way. It may be wise to grow it in a protected position, perhaps against a west- or north-facing wall in frosty areas. For gardeners wishing to attract birds, this thick, tangled scrambling plant creates good nesting sites. *Combretum bracteosum* could be grown up a strongly constructed pergola, along a fence, or down a bank. To retain a shrub shape, prune off the long twining stems as they grow. It might prove helpful for gardeners battling against salt-laden winds, as it grows naturally close to the sea and enjoys sandy soil.

The hiccup nut may be grown from seed. The hard outer shells need to be cracked and the seeds removed. In general, *Combretum* seed needs to be fresh for successful germination. The seeds should then be soaked for 12 hours where they will absorb water, allowing germination to begin. You will see the seeds swell up. They can be grown lengthways on the seedling mix and covered lightly. Germination mostly takes place after 26 days, although some may start earlier. Seedlings can be transferred successfully to bags. In frosty areas allow the young plants to grow to a height of at least 0.5 m before planting out. Cuttings with a heel can also be used, as well as lifted rooted suckers from an established plant. Select well-drained areas for planting, as in its natural habitat it favours growing in sand. Add plenty of good compost to the soil. Once planted out, flowering should occur in about three years.

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Credits

Alice Aubrey

Walter Sisulu National Botanical Garden

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