

LISSATABA TREE OF THE MONTH

April 2022



Tree of the month: Leadwood

Other names: Bastard Yellow Wood, Elephant's Trunk, Ironwood, Ivory Tree, Hardekool, Loodhout, Menshoutboom (Afr.), Mondzo, Motswiri Ummono, Umphulumbu (Xitsonga), *Combretum imberbe* (Lat.)

imberbe – Latin word meaning beardless (hairless leaves)

SA Tree number: 539

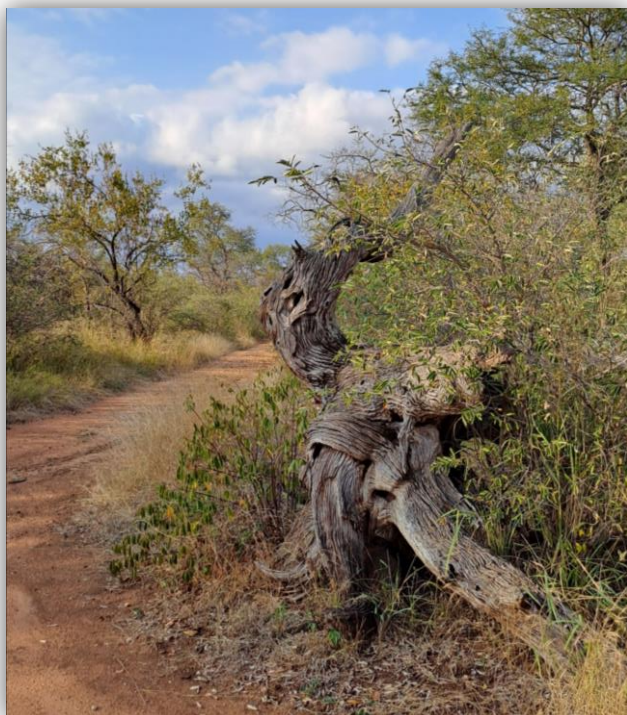
We have excellent bushwillow representation on Lissataba and, for me; the icon of the group would have to be the Leadwood as it is the tallest of all the combretum species and a protected tree in South Africa. Its wood used to be used to make railway sleepers in the past. We are fortunate to have many wonderful specimens of this tree throughout the reserve. A highly visible and impressive one stands on the left hand side of the main road as one heads towards the housing section shortly after the turn-off to Heron Dam. It appears to have been damaged during its life and yet continues its journey skywards, virtually unscathed.

Other examples occur on Leadwood Road (aptly named) and the Open Plains area. If you have some time on your hands, take a stroll along some of the dry riverbeds as these trees particularly like growing on alluvial soils along drainage lines. This tree is thought to be an indicator of sweet veld and good grazing areas.



A close-up of the damage to the Leadwood mentioned above.

The Leadwood is deciduous and slow growing. It can live for thousands of years, garnering much respect. These trees sport one of the hardest woods in the world, giving rise to their name. As a result, the wood is highly resistant to disease and insect damage. For years after a Leadwood tree has died, its remains lie intact in the veld. It is also one of only a few wood species that sink when thrown into water.



Entry to Leadwood Road is marked with this impressive piece of dead Leadwood.

The hard wood of the Leadwood has been used as fence posts, for mining props and as railway sleepers in the past.

The bark of this majestic tree with its spreading canopy is characteristic of the species, being almost white to pale grey with horizontal and vertical cracks and fissures. It gives one the impression of an Elephant's hide, giving rise to some of its alternative English names.



Dead branches remain on the living tree, as shown in the picture [R].



The grey-green leaves of the Leadwood are simple, opposite and grow on thorn-like shoots (Left above). The leaves have entire margins and appear distinctively wavy. Their underside is paler than the upper surface and this gives the tree an overall greyish appearance. The leaves are leathery and covered with visible silvery scales.



Leaves and flowers [L]



Leaves and fruit [R]

The flowers are small, creamy-yellow and appear in spikes on the tree (Nov – March). As is typical of all combretum species, the Leadwood has a 4-winged fruit which are covered in silvery scales. They start out yellowish-green and dry to light brown (Feb – June).

The young shoots of the Leadwood are highly palatable to several species, particularly Elephant, Giraffe, Kudu, Impala and Grey Duiker. Toothpaste can be made from the ash of the Leadwood. It has a high lime content and can also be used as a whitewash. Damaged areas on the bark produce gum which is edible and a part of the Bushmen’s diet.

Bark from the root of the tree can be used to tan leather.

A decoction from the roots can be taken orally to treat diarrhoea while an infusion of the root bark can assist with the treatment of bilharzia. Coughs and colds can be treated by placing green leaves on hot coals and inhaling the resultant smoke. An infusion made from Leadwood flowers can also be used to treat coughs.

The difference between a decoction and an infusion is: both extract the properties of a plant for consumption but an infusion is made with leaves or flowers while a decoction is made with bark and roots. Several texts indicate that the seeds may be poisonous.

Interestingly, the Herero tribe of Namibia call the Leadwood a sacred tree or “Omumborombonga” as they believe it is the origin of life.



Reference sources:

Books

Schmidt, E., Lotter, M. & McClelland, W. (2017). *Trees and Shrubs of Mpumalanga and Kruger National Park*. Jacana Media, Johannesburg.

Venter, F. & Venter, J.A. (1996). *Making the most of Indigenous Trees*. Briza Publications, Pretoria.

Websites:

<https://www.wildcard.co.za/five-kruger-tree-species-to-look-for/>

<https://singita.com/archive/general/fascinating-flora-the-leadwood-tree/>

<https://treesa.org/combretum-imberbe/>

<https://www.motherearthliving.com>

Credits for the images are given below:

Flowers and leaves image: https://www.inaturalist.org/guide_taxa/842175

Leaves/Fruits and lateral shoots: <https://treesa.org/combretum-imberbe/>

Squirrel: <https://blog.londolozzi.com/2014/08/27/five-iconic-trees-of-londolozzi/>

Remainder of photo's – Robyn-Lynne Reid

