

Diospyros austro-africana Kritikom, Fire Stick Tree



Left: *Diospyros austro-africana* var. *rubriflora*. Photo Joan Faiola, inaturalist.org CC BY-NC

Right: *Diospyros austro-africana*. Photo Felix Riegel, inaturalist.org CC BY-NC

Diospyros austro-africana is a beautiful South African indigenous shrub, or small tree, that bears little cream, pink and even red lantern-like flowers. Not only attractive to man but also to birds and butterflies, it grows in different regions and conditions across the country. Some species are valued for the Persimmon fruit, others are known as ebony trees.

Description

A multi stemmed slow growing shrub or small tree, somewhat rounded, 2 to 10 m high. The bark is medium to dark brown with fine, flakey strips. The brown branches are finely haired, similar to the fine hairs on the obovate leaves (35 x 2.5mm). The leaves are slightly darker and velvety on top and velvety underneath, giving this shrub a dusty grey appearance.

The flowers are pendulous, creamy white, cerise-pink or red. Each flower is surrounded by a 5-lobed calyx, composed of sepals, which holds the developing fruit which increases in size after flowering. The ovary is borne on a smooth, hairless disc; fruits carry 2 or more seeds; and is unique to *Diospyros*. Plants are dioecious, either male or female. Flowering time: August to November.

Fruits, round and fleshy are borne from January to June. These are velvety, usually 15 mm in diameter, and contain tannins that deter grazing animals until fruits ripen red to black.

Distribution and habitat

There are four varieties of *Diospyros austro-africana*. Generally this is a water-wise plant that can tolerate low temperatures and severe frost:

- . var. *austro-africana* occurs in the Western Cape regions and north towards Namaqualand;
- . var. *microphylla* is the most common and widespread, occurring in the Western Cape, Northern Cape, Free State and further north of the Vaal River;
- . var. *rubiflora* occurs inland from the Free State, Lesotho to KwaZulu-Natal;
- . var. *rugosa* occurs in the Western Cape.



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Left: *Diospyros austro-africana* var. *microphylla*. Note the hairs on the leaves. Photo Gigi Laidler, inaturalist.org CC BY-NC

Right: *Diospyros austro-africana*. Photos Andrew Hankey, inaturalist.org CC BY-NC

Derivation of name and historical aspects

Diospyros austro-africana was previously known as *Royena hirsuta* and The Plant List accepts its name to be *Diospyros pubescens*. *Diospyros* is derived from the Greek, *dios* or divine, and *pyros* meaning wheat or grain. The Australian species *Diospyros australis* Black plum grows in rain-forest of NSW.

The Plant List accepts 725 species of *Diospyros*. These are found in sub-tropical and tropical areas.

Diospyros austro-africana belongs to the family Ebenaceae. The family contains two genera in South Africa: *Diospyros* and *Euclea*. Ebenaceae has only one other genus: *Lissocarpa*.

Ecology

Speckled and Red-faced Mousebirds; Black-collared, Pied and Crested Barbets; Black-eyed Bulbuls and Red-winged Starlings enjoy the fruits of this shrub. The flowers attract insects and they are eaten by Southern Boubou, flycatchers, white-eyes, robins and thrushes. The larvae of the Natal Copper butterfly feed on this plant.

Uses

The wood of *Diospyros austro-africana* is used to make fire. The fruits are also edible. This shrub is slow growing, a good rockery plant and can be used in a mixed border or as a screening shrub. Has good potential as a bonsai.

The most well-known member of the genus is *Diospyros kaki* Persimmon, from Asia, growing in the C20 Garden lawn near the Conservatory. Other members of the genus are edible and some produce the highly sought-after timber, ebony. Ebony was the traditional timer for the black keys of the piano. The dark ebony of Indian and Sri Lankan *Diospyros* species was stripped by the Dutch.

Propagation

From seeds, as the cuttings are very difficult to root. Collect ripe, clean seed. Use them as soon as possible. Use 50% sand and 50% seedling mixture in the trays. Place the trays on hotbeds and do not allow them to dry out.

Germination is within three weeks. Allow seedlings to harden off. Transplant after a month in the hardening off area or they can stay in the seedling tray for years. The plants need full sun and well-drained soil.

Summary

Family: Ebenaceae

Genera: *Diospyros*

Species: *Diospyros austro-africana*

Common names: Fire sticks, Star apple, Persimmon (Eng), Kritikom (destiny, luck)

Distribution: Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Namaqua land and Northern South Africa

Location in GBG: 19C Garden, Bunya lawn bed close to Friends building path.

References

South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) PlantZAfrica pza.sanbi.org

Wikipedia



Top: *Diospyros austro-africana* GBG, Mar 2019. Photo: AMcG

Bottom: *Diospyros austro-africana* var. *austro-africana*, Goegap Nature Reserve, South Africa, Tony Rebelo, inaturalist.org CC BY-SA

