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Adansonia digitata (baobab)

Baobab, Africa's iconic 'upside-down' tree, is pollinated by bats and bushbabies.



Adansonia digitata (baobab) (Photo: David Goyder, RBG Kew)

Species information

Scientific name: *Adansonia digitata* L.

Common name: baobab

Conservation status:

Least Concern (LC) according to IUCN Red List criteria; widespread and locally common.

Habitat: Dry bushland, woodland, wooded grassland; often left standing in cultivated areas.

Key Uses: Foodstuff, medicine, rope-making, basketry.

Known hazards: None known.

Taxonomy

Class: Equisetopsida
Subclass: Magnoliidae
Superorder: Rosanae
Order: Malvales
Family: Malvaceae
Genus: *Adansonia*

About this species

Widespread and common, baobab is a defining icon of African bushland and can grow to an old age. Radiocarbon dating of a baobab in Namibia indicated an age of about 1,275 years, making this the

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are used by local

way, and each tree

even had its own name. The large, white flowers are pollinated by bats and bushbabies. Elephants often gouge the trunks of baobabs to get at the water inside and can damage mature trees.

It has recently been proposed that the African baobab consists of two species – one very widely distributed lowland species with four sets of chromosomes (*Adansonia digitata*), and a second, more montane species with just two sets of chromosomes (*A. kilima*). Some floral differences can be observed, but the hypothesis needs to be tested with wider geographic coverage.

Genus: *Adansonia*

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Geography and distribution

Adansonia digitata is widespread in the drier parts of tropical and southern Africa, from Mauritania in the northwest to Sudan in the northeast, and south to South Africa. It is also found in the Arabian Peninsula.

Description

Overview: A massive, deciduous tree with a trunk that can grow to an immense girth. The bark is smooth.

Leaves: Borne at the ends of branches, leaves are usually divided into 5–7 leaflets attached to a central point.

Flowers: Large (up to 20 cm in diameter), white and pendent on long stalks. Each flower has five free petals and many stamens (male parts).

Fruit: More or less cylindrical and up to 35 cm long and 13 cm wide. Each fruit is filled with mealy pulp containing many small, dark brown seeds, each about 1 cm long and wide. The seeds have a reddish-black seed coat.



Uses

An important indigenous fruit tree, the fruit pulp (rich in vitamin C) is eaten on its own or mixed in porridge and is also used for making soft drinks. Seeds are used as a thickener for soups, and leaves are eaten as a vegetable or in soups.

Fibres from the inner bark are used to make rope and string for basketry, as well as for making beehives. Trunks that have been hollowed by lightning or by humans have been employed imaginatively as a pub, toilet, prison and bus stop. In western Sudan, the trunks were used as water containers. The roots produce a dye.

Roots, bark, leaves, fruits and seeds are used medicinally for an enormous range of ailments, among the more common of which are iron deficiency, digestive system disorders, infections and skin disorders. Baobab is used in both human and veterinary treatments.

Baobab also has some perceived magical uses. For example, it is said that a decoction of the seeds will protect you against crocodiles and that flowers are inhabited by spirits.



Millennium Seed Bank: Seed storage

The Millennium Seed Bank Partnership aims to save plant life worldwide, focusing on plants under threat and those of most use in the future. Seeds are dried, packaged and stored at a sub-zero temperature in our seed bank vault.

Seven collections of *Adansonia digitata* are held in Kew's Millennium Seed Bank based at Wakehurst in West Sussex.

[See Kew's Seed Information Database for further information on *Adansonia digitata* seeds](#)

Cultivation

Baobab seeds germinate readily, but seedlings can take a long time to become established, and it may take 16–23 years until a tree produces its first flowers.

This species at Kew

Alcohol-preserved specimens of *Adansonia digitata* are held in Kew's Herbarium, where they are available to researchers by appointment.

Specimens of baobab are held in Kew's Economic Botany Collection in the Sir Joseph Banks Building, where they are available to researchers by appointment.

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