

THE GENUS *OLEA* IN AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

Like many families of flowering plants used in the Old World, the *Oleaceae* have been prized since the dawn of civilization. The most well known member of this family, the olive, is thought to have been in cultivation since at least 3000 BC. This marks a fundamental change in civilization, from nomadic way of life to settled way of life. Pliny writes "there are two fluids pleasant to use for the human body, internally the wine and externally the oil of the olive, but the former could be more readily dispensed with than the latter". Since Biblical times the olive has been regarded as a symbol of life and of peace. The family also contains other genera of commercial importance, *Fraxinus*, the ashes, from which Cupid's bow is reputed to have been made, and *Jasminum*, the jasmine, which have been cultivated in gardens for centuries.

The genus *Olea* also yields useful products and has many medicinal uses particularly among rural peoples. The wood is attractive and durable and has been described as "steel-like" for some species. In the past the wood has been used for firewood, fence posts, and for the manufacturing of furniture and wagon components. In South Africa many species are planted as ornamental trees for shade in gardens. The fruit is prized for consumption by many animals, including man. The medicinal uses range from being used as a mild purgative, a hypertensive agent, a styptic, and a remedy for gonorrhoea.

The wild olive (*Olea europaea* subsp. *africana*) and the black ironwood (*O. capensis* subsp. *macrocarpa*) are well-known South African tree species which have played an important role in the historical development of the country. Names of places such as Olienhoutplaai, Oliewenhoutkloof and Ysterhoutnek, derived from the Afrikaans common names, are proof of this statement.

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TAXONOMY AND DISTRIBUTION

The family *Oleaceae* was formally named in 1813, and consists of some 30 genera and 600 species, nearly cosmopolitan in distribution, but best developed in Asia and Malaysia. The olive tree was described by the famous Swedish botanist, Linnaeus, in 1753. In 1758, the wild olive was described by an English horticulturist, Miller, from material which was probably collected in South Africa.

A large number of species and varieties have been recognized, particularly as a result of the botanical expeditions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Prior to 1956 the taxonomy of the African *Olea* was confusing as can be seen from the large number of taxa reduced to synonymy. In her account of *Olea* for the Flora of South Africa, Inez Verdoorn recognizes only four species, with three subspecies of *O. capensis*, which were previously three separate species. In general her classification was welcomed as a first attempt to reduce the confusion to a workable classification. However, there was some dissatisfaction about the reduction to subspecific rank of previously recognized species.

The confusion within the *O. capensis* subspecies complex was recognized earlier this century when in 1926 it was observed that the foliage of *O. laurifolia* and *O. capensis* (meaning *O. capensis* subsp. *macrocarpa* and subsp. *capensis* respectively) in the absence of flowers and fruits was often confused by botanists and foresters. This tendency continues to date and there are still many collected specimens which are not allocated to a particular taxon. A similar situation exists in other areas where sterile specimens of *O. capensis* are confused with those of the subspecies *enervis*, particularly in southern Natal where the two taxa are marginally con-specific.

In tropical Africa the taxonomy is similarly confusing. The reduction of the large numbers of taxa into *O. europaea* subsp. *africana* by workers at Kew greatly simplified the taxonomic position of this species which is now accepted by all. In a subsequent attempt to

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