WHEN IS A YELLOWWOOD NOT A YELLOWWOOD?

AND WHEN IS A SILVER LEAF NOT A SILVER LEAF?

by Joy Abrahams

Strangely enough the answer to both questions is the same.

nthe winter of 1998 I had the pleasure and privilege of staying on a cattle ranch in the Namibian district of Gobabis on the border of the Kalahari desert. Before going, my son, who knows the owner of the farm well as he was at the same school in Cape Town, went into ecstasies over all the different kinds of trees on the farm and how

knowledgeable the owner, Mr A. Genis, is about them. He, my son, was very impressed by the beautiful yellowwoods. My immediate reaction was 'but you don't get yellowwoods in that part of the country', and I immediately consulted K. Coates Palgrave's Trees of southern Africa. Sure enough, none of the four species of Podocarpus occur there. When my son mentioned the beautiful autumn foliage of the yellowwoods, the penny dropped. This was just another case of one common name being used for two completely different trees found in two different areas. In the index to Palgrave the only reference to yellowwood is to Podocarpus.

On arrival at the farm our knowledgeable host quickly sorted out the problem. Their yellowwood is of the *Combretum* family and is *Terminalia sericea*. So we have two completely

different trees belonging to two completely different families - the one evergreen and the other deciduous with really no resemblance whatsoever except that in cross section both have yellow wood.

Terminalia sericea is a small to medium, wellshaped tree found in open woodland on sandy soils and can be locally very common, often dominant. It is widespread and its location is very interesting:

if does not occur in central Botswana but in a circle around it taking in eastern Namibia, the Northern_ Cape, southern_ Botswana, the northern_ bits of the North West and Northern_ Provinces, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal, southern_ Mozambique, Zimbabwe and ends the circle with northern_ Botswana. What makes it so interesting is that in each season it looks completely different. In late autumn and early winter it stands in all the glory of its autumn foliage not the usual garish yellows and oranges but a soft dusty pink. From a distance it looks as if the tree is covered with pink blossoms. When seeing them I recalled how many years ago in Hwange National

Park in Zimbabwe (then

Wankie Reserve) I had fallen

in love with what I thought

were trees covered in pink

flowers! Seen against the

pale blue of the Namibian

winter sky, these dusty pink

leaves have a pastel, , almost

ethereal, , beauty that is quite

winter with the leaves gone

unforgettable. In the late

but some of the reddish-

hanging on, the tracery of

the spring, the pale green

the bare branches have their,

own_particular_beauty. Come

new leaves are covered with

them a silvery sheen. In fact

the whole tree looks as if it

is covered with silver leaves - hence the species name of

sericea and the common

cluster-leaf. . Apparently

then Rhodesia (now

names as given by Palgrave of 'silver terminalia' or

'vaalboom', as well as silver

early pioneers in what was

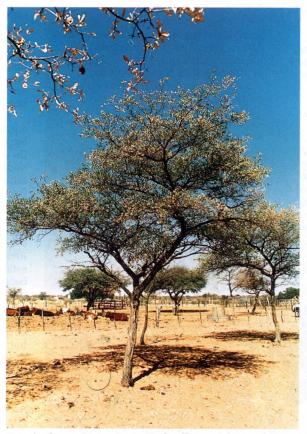
Zimbabwe) confused them

with the well known 'silver

leafs' of the Western_Cape

soft silky hairs which give

brown seed pods still



Terminalia sericea, often called yellowwood, growing on a farm near Gobabis in Namibia. Photo: A. Genis.

ANOTHER YELLOWWOOD

According to Elsa Pooley's book Wild Flowers

asparagus. As this species name suggests, it

asparagus are falcate (i.e. sickle shaped). In

fact, she says, sometimes plants of A. falcatus

are mistaken for young Podocarpus falcatus.

I have just discovered a third yellowwood.

of KwaZulu-Natal the common name of

Asparagus falcatus is the yellowwood

is called this because the leaves of this

(Leucadendron argenteum). In summer the leaves darken and their green serves as foil to show up the spikes of small cream to pink flowers. And so back to the beautiful dusty pink autumn foliage.

Terminalia sericea is a useful plant. It has been used for treating diarrhoea and colic, as an eye wash and as a hot fomentation for pneumonia. The silky, silvery leaf hairs are used by the Tewana to glaze

> their pottery. The wood is a good general-purpose wood for making furniture and long lasting fence-poles.

One does not have to be an Agatha Christie to work out the answer to both questions in the title is the beautiful, and interesting tree *Terminalia sericea*, variously called yellowwood and silver leaf. ®