

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.

In the 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, well-shaped 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.



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

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 unforgettable. In the late winter with the leaves gone but some of the reddish-brown seed pods still hanging on, the tracery of the bare branches have their own particular beauty. Come the spring, the pale green new leaves are covered with soft silky hairs which give 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 names as given by Palgrave of 'silver terminalia' or 'vaalboom', as well as silver cluster-leaf. Apparently early pioneers in what was then Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) confused them with the well known 'silver leaves' of the Western Cape

(*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 Tswana 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. ©

ANOTHER YELLOWWOOD

I have just discovered a third yellowwood. According to Elsa Pooley's book *Wild Flowers of KwaZulu-Natal* the common name of *Asparagus falcatus* is the yellowwood asparagus. As this species name suggests, it is called this because the leaves of this asparagus are falcate (i.e. sickle shaped). In fact, she says, sometimes plants of *A. falcatus* are mistaken for young *Podocarpus falcatus*.