Most common indigenous food crops of South Africa

Compiled by

Directorate: Plant Production

Division: Indigenous Food Crops

agriculture,
forestry & fisheries

Department:
Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

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Contents

1. **Definition** 1
2. **Status of indigenous food crops in South Africa** 1
3. **Main categories of indigenous food crops** 1

3.1 Grain crops 1
- Pearl millet *(Pennisetum glaucum)* 2
- Grain sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*) 3
- Cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata*) 4
- Bambara groundnuts (*Vigna subterranea*) 5
- Mungbean *(Vigna radiata)* 6

3.2 Vegetable crops 7
- Cleome (*Cleome gynandra*) 7
- Amaranth (*Amaranthus*) 8
- Blackjack (*Bidens pilosa* L.) 9
- Jews mallow (*Corchorus olitorius* L.) 10
- Cassava (*Manihot esculenta*) 11
- Amadumbe (*Colocasia esculenta*) 12

3.3 Fruit crops 13
- Marula (*Sclerocarya caffra*) 13
- Red milkwood (*Mimusops zeyheri*) 14
- Mobola plum (*Parinari curatellifolia*) 15
- Wild medlar (*Vangueria infausta*) 16
- Num-num (*Carissa macrocarpa*) 17
- Kei apple (*Dovyalis caffra*) 18
- Monkey orange (*Strychnos spinosa*) 19

4. **Acknowledgements** 20

1. Definition

Indigenous food crops refer to food crops that have their origin in South Africa. Added to these crops are those that were introduced into the country and are now recognised as naturalised or traditional crops. They are divided into three main categories; namely grains, vegetables and fruit.

2. Status of indigenous food crops in South Africa

South Africa possesses a huge diversity of indigenous food crops, which includes grains, leafy vegetables and wild fruit types. These crops are produced and found growing in the country under various weather conditions. Their production within the rural farming communities is on small scale and is mainly for subsistence purposes. Most of the arable land is used mainly for production of maize and other exotic crops.

The indigenous food crop sector is currently characterised by the following challenges:

- the sector is currently fragmented;
- most of these crops are found and harvested in the wild;
- production and consumption have declined; and
- there is limited and undocumented information owing to the minimal (or lack of) research that has been conducted.

Despite their nutritional and economic value they offer, the crops and their products were never commercialised. The surplus of the produce is only traded informally within communities to generate income for the farmers. However, there is now a growing interest by government and other stakeholders about the value of these crops to address food security and climate change. In the light of the above, the efforts to put the sector on the growth path are apparent in different organisations, e.g. government, non-government organisations, research institutes, etc.

3. Main categories of indigenous food crops

3.1 GRAIN CROPS

Indigenous grain crops can be defined as any crop yielding starch and protein-enriched seeds suitable for food. These crops are further subdivided into cereals and pulses.

CEREALS: Pearl millet (*Pennisetum glaucum*) and grain sorghum *(Sorghum bicolor)*

Pearl millet (*Pennisetum glaucum*)

Common names: Nyalothi, Ntweka, Amabele, Unyaluthi, Unyawoti, Unyawothi Inyawuthi, Muvhoho, Babala, Manna, Leotja, Mhunga, Bulrush millet

Major production areas in South Africa

Pearl millet is produced in the Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal and the Free State provinces.

Main uses

It is used mainly as whole, cracked or ground flour, dough, or grain-like rice. These are made into fermented breads, foods and thick porridges, steam-cooked dishes, non-alcoholic beverages and snacks. Pearl millet is also grown for silage and hay production. Crop residue and green plants provide building materials for fencing, thatching and making basketry.

Grain sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*)

Common names: Grain sorghum, Mabele, Amazimba, Amabele

Major production areas in South Africa

Grain sorghum is produced in the Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal, Free State, North West, Northern Cape, Eastern Cape and Gauteng provinces.

Main uses

Sorghum meal is mainly used for making porridge, unleavened bread, cookies, cakes, couscous and malted beverage. Parched seeds are used as coffee substitute. Sorghum is also an important animal feed.

Pulses: Cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata*), Bambara groundnuts (*Vigna subterranean*) and mung bean (*Vigna radiata*)

Cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata*)

Common names: Dinawa, Dinaba, Munawa, Imbumba, akkerbone

Major production areas in South Africa

Cowpea is grown in the Limpopo, Gauteng, Mpumalanga, North West and KwaZulu-Natal provinces.

Main uses

Leaves are eaten as vegetable, either fresh or dried. The immature pods and dried pulse can also be used as vegetables. Entire plants may be used as livestock fodder.

Bambara groundnuts (*Vigna subterranea*)

Common names: Ditloo marapo, Indlubu, Hlanga, Njugo, Nduhu, Phonda, Tindhluwa

Major production areas in South Africa

Bambara groundnut is grown in the Limpopo, Mpumalanga, North West, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal provinces.

Main uses

The immature seeds can be eaten boiled or grilled, while mature ones can be roasted in oil or grinded to make flour. They can also be boiled and mixed with maize kernels. The roasted ground meal can be used as a substitute for coffee. Seeds can besoaked and used to feed livestock. The leaves can also be used to feed livestock.

Mung bean *(Vigna radiata)*

Common names: Mung bean, dithlodi

Major production areas in South Africa

The major producing provinces are Limpopo and Mpumalanga.

Main uses

The principal domestic use of mung bean is the production of bean sprouts; this is usually seen in Asian cooking. Mung bean can also be used for dhal when used in ethnic cooking. It is used as a staple legume in many diets around the world. Processed mung beans are used as a soup base, for bean flour which is used for making noodles, and in a wide range of traditional Asian foods. It is also grown for forage, silage, hay and chicken feed.

3.2 VEGETABLES

Vegetable crops are defined as crops from which tender leaves, stems and petioles are harvested and used in the preparation of vegetables. These crops are further subdivided into leafy and roots/tubers.

LEAFY VEGETABLES: Cleome (*Cleome gynandra*), Amaranth (*Amaranthus*), Blackjack (*Bidens pilosa* L.) and Jews mallow (*Corchorus olitorius* L.)

Cleome (*Cleome gynandra*)

Common names: Cat's whiskers, cleome, African cabbage, oorpeultjie, Lerotho, Murudi, Rirudzu, Bangala, Ulude

Major growing areas in South Africa

The major growing areas are the KwaZulu-Natal, Free State, Northern Cape, Limpopo and North West provinces.

Main uses

The tender leaves or young shoots, and often the flowers, are boiled in stew or as a side dish. The leaves are rather bitter, and for this reason are cooked with other leafy vegetables such as cowpea, amaranth and black nightshade. To reduce the bitterness, milk is added to the boiled leaves and the mixture left overnight. In other areas; leaves are boiled briefly, the water is discarded and these are then combined with other ingredients in a stew.

Amaranths (*Amaranthus)*

Common names: Amaranths, Thepe, Vowa, Umfino, Imbuya, hanekam, Imbuya, Isheke

Major growing areas in South Africa

The main growing areas of amaranthus in South Africa are Limpopo, North West, Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal.

Main uses

Amaranth represents the largest source of nutrients of all the vegetables that can be grown in Africa. Amaranth is one of the most prized leaf vegetables. The cooked leaves are eaten in different ways as vegetable, soup or sauce.

Blackjack (*Bidens pilosa* L.)

Common names: Blackjack, gewone knapsekêrel, Umhlabangubo, Uqadolo, Mushiji, Mokolonyane, Muchiz

Major growing areas in South Africa

Blackjack grows in the wild and homestead gardens in KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo.

Main uses

Blackjack tender leaves and young shoots are used as a leaf vegetable. Sun dried powdered leaves are preserved to be used during dry or winter seasons. Blackjack young plants are said to have a high food value, although the leaf has an astringent taste.

Jews mallow (*Corchorus olitorius* L.)

Common names: Jew's mallow, wild jute, wildejute, Thelele, Delele, Gushe.

Major growing areas in South Africa

Jew's mallow is growing in the wild or at homesteads in the KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga provinces.

Main uses

Jew's mallow is used as leafy vegetable. Immature fruit is dried and grinded into a powder to prepare sauce. The dried leaves can be used as a thickener in soups. A tea is made from the dried leaves.

ROOTS/TUBER VEGETABLES: Cassava (*Manihot esculenta*) and amadumbe (*Colocasia esculenta*)

Cassava (*Manihot esculenta*)

Common names: Cassava, anioc, tapioca plant, Mutumbula, Mobulula, Muthupula, Ntsumbula, Umdumbula Othobola, Uthupula, Unjumbula.

Major production areas in South Africa

The crop is cultivated in Limpopo, Mpumalanga and northern KwaZulu-Natal.

Main uses

The tuber is used as a food, as a substitute for rice or maize meal and the leaves and tender shoots are cooked as a vegetable or used in sauces. The tuber can be chopped, dried and fed to animals. The main use of cassava in South Africa is for the production of starch, which makes a good natural adhesive.

Amadumbe (*Colocasia esculenta*)

Common names: Amadumbe, Amadombie, Amadombi, Mufhongwe

Major production areas in South Africa

Amadumbe is mainly produced in Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal.

Main uses

The mature corms and young shoots of amadumbe are used mostly as boiled vegetables; however, the corms are also roasted, baked, or fried. Roasted or boiled corms can be eaten alone or with stew. The boiled corms are mashed and used as weaning diet. Mature edible aroids are also processed into flour, which is used to prepare 'fufu' that is commonly eaten in Nigeria with stew. Amadumbe chips products: young amadumbe leaves are used with coconut cream to prepare a dish, which is then eaten with the boiled or roasted amadumbe, breadfruit and banana.

3.3 FRUIT CROPS

Indigenous fruit crops are fruit types that are found diversely in the wild in South Africa. They are seed-associated structures of certain plants that are sweet and edible in the raw state.

Marula (*Sclerocarya caffra*)

Common names: Inkanyi, marula, Umganu, Mufula, Morula

Major growing areas in South Africa

The marula tree is found widely in many of South Africa's game parks and rural communities of Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga. It is more dominant in Ba-Phalaborwa in Limpopo Province.

Main uses

Ripe fruit can be eaten fresh but is mostly processed into beverages, jam and jellies. The marula nuts are also edible. Fruit and leaves are a source of fodder and the tree provides shade and acts as windbreak and firewood.

Red milkwood (*Mimusops zeyheri*)

Common names: Transvaal red milkwood, moepel, Mmupudu, umPushane, Nhlantswa, Mubululu.

Major growing areas in South Africa

Red milkwood usually grows in woodland areas on rocky hillsides, in kloofs and riverine vegetation. It is found in the wild in the Limpopo, Gauteng, North West, Mpumalanga, KwaZulu-Natal and Free State provinces.

Main uses

Ripened fruit is edible.

Mobola plum (*Parinari curatellifolia*)

Common names: Mobola-plum, grysappel, bosappel, Mmola, Mbulwa, Mobola, Muvhula, Umkhuna

Major growing areas in South Africa

Mobola plum is found in the wild in the Mpumalanga and Limpopo provinces.

Main uses

Ripe fruit is edible and it can be cooked as porridge or fermented into beer. The crushed pulp of the fruit is an ingredient in making juice. They can also be used as dried food. The oil-enriched nuts are eaten alone or mixed with vegetables and are considered as almonds substitutes. The edible oil is used for cooking.

Wild medlar (*Vangueria infausta*)

Common names: Wild medlar, wildemispel, Mmilo, Muzwilu, Mavelo, Umviyo, Mpfilwa, Umtulwa, Mothwanye, Umvile, Amantulwane.

Major growing areas in South Africa

Wild medlar is found in the wild in all types of woodlands, especially on rocky ridges and hillsides or in wooded grassland; also near the sea on sand dunes. It is widely distributed in the forests and often found in rocky or sandy places in the Eastern Cape, Free State, KwaZulu-Natal, Mpumalanga, Gauteng, Limpopo, North West and Northern Cape provinces.

Main uses

Ripe fruit is edible by both man and wild animals. Fruit is made into a pulp as a substitute for apple sauce in puddings. It is also used for making juice or an alcoholic beverage. A type of vinegar can also be produced from the fruit. In some parts of Africa the fruit is stored as dried fruit to be used in time of food scarcity.

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Num-num (*Carissa macrocarpa*)

Common names: Num-num, noemnoem, Amatungulu, Umbethankunzi, Ditokolo.

Major growing areas in South Africa

Num-num is found in the wild in the Limpopo, Mpumalanga, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, North West, Eastern Cape, Western Cape and Free State provinces.

Main uses

Ripe fruit is edible and it can be processed into jam and jellies. Num-num can be used as a decorative plant in parking areas. It can also be used as borders and for protection because of its impenetrable hedges to both human and animals, especially when planted 1 m apart. Animals such as kudus browse on the leaves and young shoots, while some birds and monkeys feed on the fruit.

Kei apple (*Dovyalis caffra*)

Common names: Kei apple, keiappel, appelkoosdoring, Umgokolo, Amagokolo, wild apricot, um-Qokolo, Umkokola, Dingaan's apricot, Motlhono.

Major growing areas in South Africa

Kei apple is found in valley bushveld, dry areas, wooded grassland, on forest edges of the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo provinces.

Main uses

Ripe fruit is edible and can be used to make excellent jam, jelly, cake, drink, dessert or is added to fruit salad. The unripe fruit is used to make pickles. The leaves are used as fodder. Animals such as monkeys, antelope and baboons also like the fruit.

Monkey orange (*Strychnos spinosa*)

Common names: Monkey orange, klapper, Morapa, umKwakwa, Nsala, Muramba, Umhlali

Major growing areas in South Africa

Monkey orange is found in the wild in the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo provinces.

Main uses

Ripe fruit is edible and can be sundried as food preserves. It is used to make jam, juice, various fruit wines and dry fruit rolls.

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