

Euphorbia tirucalli

Euphorbiaceae

Uncertain: India or Africa

COMMON NAMES: **Boran:** Amo; **Digo:** Utudi; **English:** Finger euphorbia; **Kamba:** Nda; **Kikuyu:** Kariaria; **Luhya:** Shikhoni; **Luo:** Ojuog pap, Ojuok; **Maasai:** Oloile; **Marakwet:** Asubgwa; **Somali:** Dana; **Swahili:** Mtupa mwitu, Utupa.

DESCRIPTION: A succulent green shrub or tree to 8 m with a dense crown. Branches **smooth, green, cylindrical** in dense ascending masses on young plants but often scattered and drooping in old trees. Trunk to 30 cm in diameter, but usually much smaller. **BARK:** Green, covered with white bloom with age. Tips of young stems greenish brown. **LEAVES:** Inconspicuously small, present on young stems, soon dropping. Small, fleshy, green to greenish brown, elongate to about 1 cm. **FLOWERS:** Yellow-cream, small, in dense clusters. **FRUIT: 3-part capsules, green, tinged purple** on the side receiving sunlight; almost spherical, less than 1 cm across.

ECOLOGY: Naturalized throughout tropical Africa and commonly planted in both tropics and subtropics of Africa and Asia (India and the Far East). In Kenya, it is frequently grown as a live fence around fields, cattle bomas and homesteads in dry as well as humid areas. More important in the drier hot areas where it grows to tree size. Agroclimatic Zones II–VI.

USES: Firewood, medicine (young branches, but see 'remarks', below), fodder (for camels), bee forage, shade, live fence, ceremonial (grave marking), boundary marking, glue, latex (fish poison, insecticide).

PROPAGATION: Usually by cuttings, but may also grow from seeds.

MANAGEMENT: Plant approximately 1-m-long cuttings close together. Growth is slow at first but fast once established. Trim and top-prune to make a hedge. May become a weed if not well managed. Needs to be cut and replanted after some years. Coppicing, pruning.

REMARKS: This plant is widely used as a hedge, especially around homesteads and in schools. It is good fodder for camels. Said to improve the health of weak camels and

even to fatten them. The latex is poisonous to humans and extremely irritating to the eyes, and therefore great care should be taken while pruning the plant. Human milk is said to be the best remedy if latex gets into the eyes. The tree may be used as firewood when there are few other options, but when burned the smoke irritates the eyes. Medicine from the plant must be used with extreme care due to its high toxicity. Tree snakes often inhabit these bushes. The plant suppresses undergrowth, including crops, and therefore should not be planted in cropland. Its shallow and extensive roots quickly deplete moisture in the topsoil. An excellent shade tree in dry, hot areas.

FURTHER READING: Beentje, 1994; Bein et al., 1996; Bekele-Tesemma et al., 1993; Dharani, 2002; Fichtl and Adi, 1994; Katende et al., 1995; Kokwaro, 1993; Mbuya et al., 1994; Noad and Birnie, 1989; Palgrave and Palgrave, 2002.

