

# Mpingo

*Dalbergia melanoxylon*

**Other Names:** African blackwood, Babanus, Grenadilla, Mozambique ebony, Mufunjo, Mugembe, Mukelete

**Family:** Fabaceae

**Natural Range:** Throughout sub-Saharan Africa

## IUCN Conservation Status

Near Threatened (NT)

Mpingo is a small, gnarled, heavily branched tree that grows extremely slowly, not reaching harvestable age for between 70 and 100 years. It grows under a wide range of environmental conditions and is native to 26 African countries. It ranges from Ethiopia in the north to Angola in the south, and spreads from Senegal in the west across to Tanzania in the east.

Mpingo is an important component of many ecosystems, including the open miombo woodland that covers two thirds of Tanzania. It is a nitrogen fixing species that improves soil fertility and is also good at maintaining soil stability. Mature trees have the ability to survive fires that sweep through grasslands destroying other vegetation.

The dark heartwood of mpingo, which gives it its western name of African blackwood, is one of the most economically valuable timbers in the world. It has exceptional mechanical properties that make it perfect for carving and it has a beautiful finish. It is used for carving intricate ornaments in Tanzania.

In Europe and North America, it is used to manufacture woodwind instruments, such as clarinets, oboes and bagpipe. The loss of the export and carving industries in Tanzania would devastate local economies and would be disastrous for instrument manufacturers in the west. Many musicians feel that mpingo instruments create beguiling and mellow tones that cannot be achieved with instruments made of alternative materials

A variety of ailments are treated locally with medicines made from different parts of the tree. In some areas, the wood is boiled to produce a broth that is

used to bathe newborn babies, which is believed to impart strength. The leaves, bark and pods can all be used as animal fodder and the heart and sapwood can be burnt as high-energy fuel, or made into charcoal.

In countries such as Kenya, mpingo is considered to be seriously threatened. There is growing concern among instrument manufacturers that the supplies of high quality wood are becoming limited. Although mpingo is not likely to become biologically extinct, it is at high risk of becoming locally and commercially extinct as mature trees are being harvested at an apparently unsustainable rate.

The wood is brittle and shatters easily, therefore sections containing irregularities cannot be used for instruments. The trees are so twisted that only small sections can be used, and around 90 percent of the tree is wasted. A further quarter of exported timber is unsuitable due to hidden irregularities.

Uncontrolled fires intended to clear land for agriculture kill young trees, and can cause heart rot in older trees, as they acquire fungus infections due to fire damage. Selective harvesting of straighter, taller trees may be causing 'genetic erosion' that may reduce the genetic quality of the population. Unsuitable characteristics may thus become more prevalent in future populations.

Various measures have been taken to protect mpingo in countries where it occurs. Most notably, in Tanzania, two communities, working through the [Mpingo Conservation and Development Initiative](#), obtained the first certificate for community-managed natural forest in Africa. This landmark achievement is enabling the communities – through responsible forest management – to earn up to 400 times more from their woodlands than they have done previously.

### **Selected references**

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