The Shamba Times

Kenya Horticultural Society North Coast District

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Vol 12 Issue 2

North Coast District

IN THIS EDITION

Our cover photo

Our cover photo for this edition of The Shamba Times is of the plant that KHS nominated to become the national flower of Kenya, a few years ago.

This one was photographed in a member's garden in Watamu.

It is of course Adenium obesum, more commonly known as Desert Rose. Whilst a shrub, the plants can grow quite large and are found both in gardens and in the wild across Kenya. The are drought tolerant and very hardy and thus suited to the increasingly dry climate that Kenya is experiencing.

Most coastal gardeners have Adenium obesum in their gardens somewhere, and the Malindi roundabout is quite literally full of them! They are indeed a popular and loveable plant, and indigenous to Kenya.

Chairman's Notes

Hello everybody, and welcome to the Spring edition of The Shamba Times. I say Spring, because this is the April edition of the ST, but we don't really have seasons here in the North Coast District, or do we?

There is the Hot Season (aptly named this year for sure), which could also be called the Dry Season, and then there are the Long Rains, perhaps followed by what we might call the Cool Season, which is itself followed by the Short Rains, and then we're back to where we started. So, yes, perhaps we do have four seasons, and they do impact our gardens and our gardening in quite significant ways, but unlike the four conventional seasons, ours are not quite guaranteed in the way that Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter are in more temperate climes.

But as gardeners, we have to deal with the climatic cards that we are dealt. Yes, wells and boreholes do allow a dry garden to be irrigated at reasonable cost, and good rains certainly move our gardens forward very rapidly, but we must also deal with the long hot and dry periods between rains, and if we are smart, we should plant according to the climatic conditions that now prevail in our North Coast District.

It would seem from the statistics that the Kenyan North Coast is gradually becoming a warmer dryer place, and if that is indeed the case, then we may have to think about how that impacts our gardens as they currently are, and what we might do to plant for a dryer warmer climate.

In other words, we need to embrace change. Gardens are by their very nature dynamic places. Let's move with them. Happy planting.

Crispin Sharp

What's up on Whatsapp?

One morning in February this year, Mimi Shaw was inspired by a photo posted on our KHS NCD Whatsapp group. This is the poem that Mimi wrote and which delighted members of the Whatsapp group.

The Earth's Delight by Mimi Shaw

Oh, what wonder in the ancient trees,
Their arms outstretched to kiss the breeze,
Whispering secrets to the skies,
A world of green where wisdom lies.

The grasses sway, a sea of song,
A rhythm steady, true, and strong.
Each blade a voice, each root a thread,
Binding the earth where life is fed.

The shrubs stand proud, their blossoms bright,
Crowned by dew in morning's light.
With every thorn, with every bloom,
They weave a scent to chase the gloom.

And hills that roll, and cliffs that soar,
The earth's own art, forevermore.
Their curves and crests, their gentle fall,
A masterpiece that holds us all.

Oh, how the earth does sing to me,
In every leaf, in every tree,
In every shadow, every stone,
A love that feels like coming home.

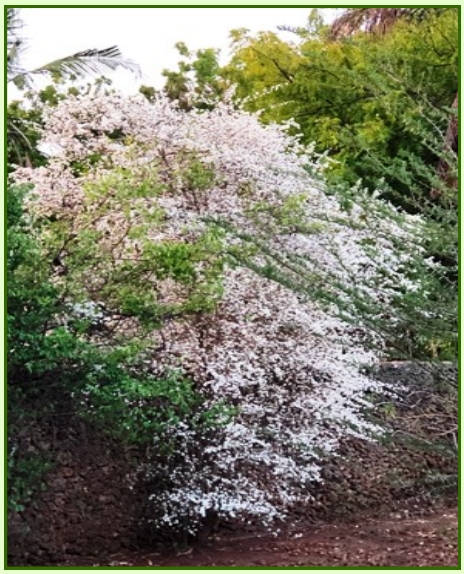
So let us dance where nature calls,
Among her forests, streams, and walls.
For in her arms, there's joy, there's peace,
A boundless wonder that will never cease.

My Garden

When we moved from Nyali to Shanzu forty years ago it seemed a big step at the time as there wasn't much development between the two apart from the hotels and houses along the sea-front.

Several of our friends in Nyali I know thought we were mad.

A garden on the edge of Mtwapa Creek that is based on solid coral, where the well water turned out to be almost 100% salt and where no municipal water has come through the pipes now for 30 years (in fact even the pipes were stolen several years ago) is challenging! My husband and I were ambitious in the beginning - the digger brought in for the pool, made big holes for coconut trees, plus we planted mango, citrus, bananas and pawpaws - but as the area around us developed and every Vervet and Sykes monkey for miles around moved onto our plot, our enthusiasm waned somewhat! Now as I live alone here, I concentrate on a small area around the house plus my verandah which is adorned with numerous pots and hanging baskets.



The wider garden has a beautiful baobab *(as illustrated)* in pride of place, planted 30 years ago, and is also covered with Acacia trees, Neems, Flamboyants, tree Jasmine *(as illustrated)*, Desert Roses and Pride of Barbados… lots of green but plenty of colour too.

By Angela Turner

Growing a variety of colourful flowers interspersed with pots of herbs on the verandah gives me great pleasure. Currently, I have a lovely display of Portulaca *(as illustrated)* and alongside them a large pot of salad leaves and a variety of herbs. I have had displays of Roses, Coleus *(as illustrated)*, Sunflowers and Zinnias. Bright and cheerful as I step out of the house.

At the far end of the garden on a headland that juts out into the creek, is unspoilt virgin land with *Mbambakofi* and a variety of other shrubs and trees I cannot identify! It is fenced but grows wild outside the fence also and I try to guard it fiercely from the ever persistent person who has ambitions to cut it all down for firewood or charcoal! It is home to squirrels, snakes, bushbabies and monitor lizards and I just hope that whoever lives here after me will also protect it.

Anyone who knows a proven rain dance please start practising - my garden is becoming a dust bowl, the rainwater tanks are empty and it's oh so very hot. Thank goodness for rockeries where the tough desert roses thrive and bring colour amidst the cactus, cycad, agave and aloes *(as illustrated)*. What would we do without them and, of course, the ever beautiful bougainvillea?

Bookworm - 3 books worth looking at.

Susan Carter, *Plant Hunting Adventures in Eastern Tropical Africa*

Published by the author, 2024.

This magnificent book describes a Kew Garden botanist's plant hunting expeditions in Kenya, Tanzania, Somalia, Sudan, and Zimbabwe between 1977 and 1994. Its 596 pages include about 1,000 colour photos and 12 maps. The emphasis is on succulent plants. The text includes accounts of the journeys with several colleagues and describes mainly succulent plants. Two visits to the North Coast are described, staying at the Driftwood Beach Club. They include visits to the Gedi Ruins, Chasimba Rocks, Jilori Forest, and a field trip to Mangea Hill with Ann Robertson. It is available from NHBS (nhbs.com) in England for £42 plus shipping.

Len Newton

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Julian Doberski, *The Science of Garden Biodiversity: The Living Garden*

Published by Pimpernel Press Limited, 2024. £9.99

What drew me to this book was the somewhat provocative comment made in a recent review of it (by Ursula Buchan, *The Spectator,* 16 November, 2024) that "This book…dispels the myth that only native plants promote biodiversity, which means 'rewilding' gardens. No, it doesn't, and this slim paperback tells you why not." The author, Julian Doberski, a retired university lecturer in ecology, tells us how, with the help of solid scientific data and open minds, we can get a better understanding of just how rich our gardens are in biodiversity and how gardens function ecologically. Discover, he says, the role of 'small things' - microorganisms and invertebrates- that are fundamental to garden biodiversity but are often overlooked when thinking about encouraging wildlife.

Wendy Taylor

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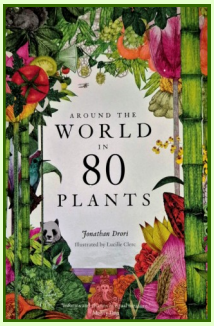
Jonathan Dori, *Around the World in 80 Plants*

Published by Laurence King Publishing, 2023



This is a wonderful book, not one that I have read from cover to cover, it's not that sort of book, but one that the reader can dip into it, be it searching for a favourite plant, or researching a region of the world to meet new plants. The real joy of this book is not just its tremendously informative text, but also its wonderfully happy and fulsome illustrations, The combination of text and illustrations is a marriage made in heaven. And yes, there is a section on plants of Africa, including one from Kenya, but you'll have to buy or borrow the book to find out which one.

Jonathan Drori, the author of Around the World in 80 Plants, has also produced an Around the World in 80 Trees. I want it!

Crispin Sharp

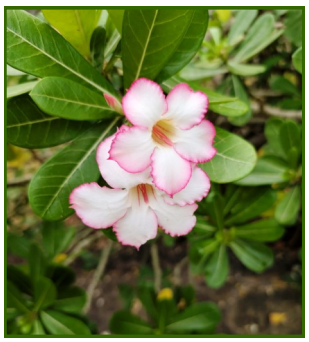
Plants and trees of the NCD.

A gallery of members' recent photographs

Euphorbia milii
Manuela Tobaldin, Kilifi

Andansonia digitata flower
Robert Horner, Kilifi

Jatropha gossypiifolia
Manuela Tobaldin, Kilifi



Adenium obesum
Matilda Thompson, Watamu

Adenium obesum
Mimi Shaw, Malindi

Adenium obesum
Alan and Jane de Voest, Watamu

Delonix elata
Janine Angell, Tsavo East

Delonix regia
Mikush Sapieha, Watamu

Delonix elata
Janine Angell, Tsavo East

Rhodognaphlon schumma-nianum
Norbert Rottcher, Shimba Hills

Garden fruits
Mimi Shaw, Malindi

Gardenia volkensii fruit
Kerstin Sommer, Watamu

Is the Baobab Tree Succulent?

Reprinted from the Cactus and Succulent Journal of Great Britain, Vol. 36, No. 3, August, 1974.

Is the Baobab Tree Succulent?

by Len Newton

Fig. 1. A carpenter at work beneath a fine old baobab at Bolgatanga, northern Ghana; a dry-season view when the leaves have fallen; height 36 feet, girth 41 feet. (photo: L. Newton)

IN HIS ACCOUNT of the 12th I.O.S. Congress, R. B. Pearce (1973) makes a statement which some readers may dispute. His paragraph referring to my slide lecture on West African succulents ends with: "Although not commonly thought of as such, the great baobab tree is, in fact, a succulent". The position of this statement in the text suggests that it represents my opinion, though I did not express such an opinion during my lecture. I should like to make some comments on this.

Although my lecture was entitled "West African Succulents" I included several plants which I do not really regard as succulents, and so the term was used rather loosely. All the plants which were illustrated or referred to in my lecture were included on the sole criterion that they are found in succulent plant literature. For example, the *Ceropegia* species which were shown (*C. campanulata, C. deightonii, C. porphyrotricha* and a possibly new taxon) are all geophytes, with underground tubers from which arise annual shoots having no succulent tissues at all. In cultivation these plants would be grown with the tubers at ground level, and they would be called 'caudiciform' plants. In a recent article published elsewhere I have written on my opinion that caudiciform plants are not succulent (Newton, 1974). What about the baobab then—is it succulent? The answer seems to be: "it depends on what you mean by succulent".

Succulent plants are characterised by the possession of water-storage parenchyma, sometimes called aqueous tissue. Parenchyma is a tissue consisting of living, thin-walled cells with air spaces between them. In water-storage parenchyma the cells are large and contain a lot of mucilage, and water is stored by being held in the mucilage. In leaf succulents the storage tissue normally occupies the central mesophyll region, below the green photosynthetic layer. In stem succulents it is usually the cortex, and often also the central pith region, which is succulent. Other structural features include such things as thick cuticle and sunken stomata, which are also found on other xerophytes. A biochemical feature associated with succulent plants is 'Crassulacean acid metabolism' (so called because it was first observed in members of the Crassulaceae), involving the accumulation of certain organic acids in darkness, followed by breakdown of the acids with the release of carbon dioxide in daylight.

Several growers who have raised *Adansonia digitata* from seed have commented that the seedlings show no sign of succulence (e.g. Ginns, 1972; Powell, 1972). Young plants have no succulent cortex, or any other succulent tissue, and the enlarged trunk of older plants is composed almost entirely of wood. In the natural habitat the trunk of young plants develops a conical shape after some years (fig. 1), but only very old trees have the grotesque shape often featured in succulent plant literature (fig. 2). Some years ago I heard a lecturer at a branch meeting in England say that if you punch the trunk of a baobab tree your fist will sink into the spongy wood. He was not speaking from personal experience, and the statement was challenged by a member of the audience who told us that he had climbed a

baobab tree in Africa. I can now add my support to this refutation. Punching the trunk of a baobab tree would probably feel just like punching the trunk of an oak tree, and I found that it needed a hefty blow with a cutlass to cut out a small piece of wood for examination. As far as I am aware, Crassulacean acid metabolism has not been found to occur in the Bombacaceae, though I do not know if any members of the genus *Adansonia* have been investigated. Clearly *Adansonia digitata* is not a stem succulent in the same way that a *Cereus* or a *Stapelia* is. What, then, is its claim to succulence? To answer this we must examine the wood of which the huge trunk is composed.

The baobab is a member of the family Bombacaceae, most of whose members have very light and soft wood (Metcalfe & Chalk, 1950). Probably most readers are familiar with the extraordinary balsa wood, which is from another member of this family, *Ochroma lagopus*. Almost all wood contains a certain amount of parenchyma, but in members of the Bombacaceae the wood parenchyma is especially abundant. Most African timbers have densities ranging from about 25 lb., cu. ft. for light timber, to over 60 lb., cu. ft. for heavy timber, in air-dry condition. When a tree is felled the wood contains some water, and so there is a difference between the weight of freshly cut wood and that of wood allowed to dry for some time. As an example, African Mahogany *(Khaya ivorensis)* is a medium weight timber whose wood has a density of 44 lb./cu. ft. when freshly cut, and 35 lb./cu. ft. when air-dry. The density of baobab wood is 53 lb./cu. ft. when cut fresh from the tree, but only 13 lb./cu. ft. when air-dry; the rest of the weight is water (Pardy, 1953). Thus although it has no distinct region consisting entirely of water-storage parenchyma, the baobab is able to store large quantities of water in its wood.

Fig. 2. The author examines a young baobab in the dry season in northern Ghana; height 9½ feet. (photo: Chris Kwashie)

So, is the baobab a succulent plant? As I said, it depends on what you mean by succulent! If we define a succulent plant as one which stores water internally in any way at all, then *A. digitata* is certainly succulent. If we restrict the term to those plants which have distinct expanses of water-storage parenchyma, so that the stems or leaves have a fleshy or juicy consistency (which is what the word 'succulent' means etymologically), then *A. digitata* is not succulent. I am inclined to favour the second view, regarding the baobab and its relatives as representing an odd kind of water-storage, along with the 'tank-plants' of the Bromeliaceae. This is a personal view and is not intended as an authoritative edict; a specialist in plant morphology might have a different opinion. In spite of my conclusion I shall continue to include the baobab in my lecture on West African succulents, and must confess that I am guilty of having used the term succulent in this loose way in a recent letter to another journal, concerning the appearance of the baobab in a Ghanaian bank-note design.

Perhaps I could end by mentioning another term used by some botanists, and which would be applied here. The term is 'pachycaul' (pachy=thick; caulis=stem) and it is used to describe any plant with an abnormally thick stem, whatever the cause of the thickness. As stem succulents are pachycaulous other pachycaul plants attract the attention of succulent plant enthusiasts because of their similar outward appearance. Consequently a number of non-succulent or doubtfully succulent pachycaul plants have found their way into succulent plant literature. Examples are species of *Dracaena, Cavanillesia, Chorisia, Phytolacca* and *Plumeria*. (Note that this list includes some other members of the Bombacaceae). If, therefore, you are not sure whether or not a particular thick-stemmed oddity is really succulent, you may like to play safe by calling it pachycaul—but don't ask me how thick a stem has to be to qualify for this term!

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The KHS North Coast District 2025 AGM

Our KHS North Coast District AGM took place from 1000 on Tuesday 25 March 2025 in our chairman's garden within Kibokoni Residence.

More than 65 members and gardener members attended the meeting at which our committee members put themselves up for re-election, and at which the Chairman's Report for 2024 and the Treasurer's Report for 2024 were both approved by members.

As at all our meetings, thanks to the hard work and commitment of Holly Hamilton, we offered all our members coffee and tea upon arrival and some delicious biscuits and mandazis to inject a little energy ahead of the meeting.

And of course our KHS North Coast District pop-up shop was very much in evidence with its own dedicated space designed to capture the attention of members as they came through Crispin's gates and into the garden area. We owe huge thanks to Maike Potgieter who has taken our shop to the next level in terms of its scope and variety of gardening and home products that are made available to members at very competitive prices. The pop-up shop has become one of our NCD major streams of revenue, and unlike KHS subscriptions which we share a portion of with KHS, the profit the pop-up shop makes all stays within our NCD finances.

There was also our traditional AGM plant sale, at which our members and their gardeners are invited to bring along plants for sale - always a popular and well patronised part of the morning. And a small exhibition of nature-related art! Baobabs featured strongly..

The highlight of the morning was a fascinating talk by Sally Share about soil, it's history in relation to humans, cultivation, the discovery of oil, the internal combustion engine and much much more. We learned a great deal about how to care for our soil, a lot of what not to dos, and how the chemistry of our soil will directly impact the trees and plants that depend upon it Out thanks go to Sally and to everybody who contributed to the success of this year's AGM.

Reports on our recent meetings

On Tuesday 28 January, over 40 NCD members attended an interesting presentation about organic seaweed fertiliser that is now on the market and produced here on the Kenya coast.
The meeting took place in the gardens of Woburn Residence in Malindi and our thanks are due to Ellie and Franco Esposito for their kind hospitality and excellent organisation of the meeting venue.

The meeting began with a talk by the founder and CEO of Sea Earth Organics, and was followed by a large number of interested questions with members wanting to know the actual process of making the fertiliser from raw seaweed, and how effective it is in promoting good health and fast growth of plants.

Sea Earth Organics seaweed fertiliser is now available for purchase through the KHS NCD pop-up shop and a number of members are already using it. Results are yet to be formally recorded. Let's see how it works!

On Saturday 1st March, around 50 North Coast District members made their way deep into the Arabuko Sokoke Forest, which lies right in the middle of our district and which is an important globally recognised surviving piece of indigenous coastal forest.

Our visit, which was to the newly refurbished forest viewing point, was organised and facilitated by Jonathan Baya and Maike Potgieter. Jonathan, who is himself an Arabuko Sokoke forest guide, ensured that the track to the viewing point was in good condition and that our purchase of tickets through KFS was handled very smoothly and efficiently. Maike set up a wonderfully welcoming coffee station at the Sheldrick viewing platform, which later segued into a bar area as we offered each of our members a glass of early morning bubbly.

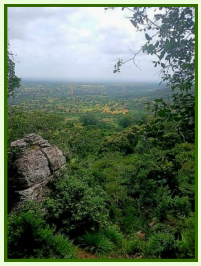
Jonathan led a number of small group walks into nearby parts of the forest, while some members stayed put at the viewing point where they could look down on great swathes of the forest and to the ocean beyond.

Our thanks are due to FoASF who also helped facilitate our very successful visit.

Diary of upcoming NCD events

Saturday 26 April at 1000. We hope to visit a member's shamba in Kilifi .

Our April meeting is yet to be confirmed, but we hope to be able to visit a member's shamba in Kilifi and to promote a discussion about soil health, crops for the coast, dealing with pests, and mitigating the hot dry seasons.



Tuesday 27 May at 0900. An expedition to Mwangea Hills.

We invite members to join us on a visit to the Mwangea Hills. The hills are located south of the Tsavo Road that leads from Malindi to Sala Gate and the entrance to Tsavo East.

We shall arrange a rendezvous point at Kakoneni to allow members coming from Watamu and/or Kilifi to avoid making the trek to Malindi. Bring a picnic, a chair and some walking shoes. We will aim to set up a tea and coffee station and perhaps a lunchtime drinks service.

Saturday 28 June at 1000. We visit a 're-wilding project' close to Mwtapa.

We invite members to visit a remarkable re-wilding project by Rolf Lattman, near Mtwapa, where a parcel of coastal indigenous forest has been replanted and brought back to life. Details will follow.

KHS North Coast District

KENYA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY
Gardening Kenya

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To join the KHS North Coast District WhatsApp group, please contact Crispin Sharp on 0798 902 442 and ask to be added to the group.