Khaya senegalensis: A Resilient Tree for Wasteland Reclamation

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OPEN ACCESS

Keywords

Khaya senegalensis, Multipurpose Trees, Commercial Plantations, Timber Value and Dry Regions

How to cite this article:

Kumar, P., Kiruba, M., Mangammal, P., Venkatesan, M., Angelin, J. A. and Rani, M. S. A. 2025. Khaya senegalensis: A Resilient Tree for Wasteland Reclamation. *Vigyan Varta* 6(7): 74-77.

ABSTRACT

Khaya senegalensis (African mahogany), native to tropical Africa, is a fast-growing, drought-tolerant tree well-suited for commercial plantations in dry regions. Renowned for its rich reddish-brown wood, it serves both ornamental and economic purposes. Its adaptability to poor soils and arid climates makes it ideal trees for wasteland reclamation. The species is increasingly popular for timber, shade and avenue planting with potential to reduce timber imports and contribute to sustainable land restoration and rural livelihoods. This document explores its cultivation, adaptability, ecological importance and economic viability.

INTRODUCTION

Khaya senegalensis (Desr.) A. Juss. is an important multipurpose tree in its natural range in sub- Saharan Africa. It is particularly valued for timber, fuelwood and medicinal purposes as well as being a popular shade and amenity tree (CAB International 2000). In its natural habitat it is a medium-sized to large tree (up to 30 m) with a wide crown. In cultivation as an exotic, it can grow up to more than 35 m high and up to 1½ m in diameter (CAB International 2000; Jøker and Gaméné 2003). *Khaya senegalensis*, commonly known as African mahogany, is a fast-growing, drought-tolerant deciduous tree native to West Africa. Belonging to the family Meliaceae, this species is increasingly recognized for its ecological versatility, economic value and potential in rehabilitating degraded and marginal lands. There are another four species under the genus Khaya

such as *Khaya* anthotheca, Khaya grandifoliola, Khaya ivorensis *and* Khaya madagascariensis. Its natural population has dwindled as a result of excessive logging. As a result, the species has been listed as vulnerable on the Red List of Threatened Species of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The tree is considered to be an invasive species in some locations but can be used for hedging or landscaping purposes. It can be propagated by seed or cuttings from mature trees, depending on the location and climate conditions.

Significance in Wasteland Reclamation

Khaya senegalensis thrives in arid to semi-arid regions and tolerates poor, degraded soils, making it ideal for restoring wastelands. Its deep-rooting system enhances soil structure, prevents erosion, and improves water infiltration, while its leaf litter contributes to soil fertility

Why it was introduced in India?

African Mahogany has a long history, India. The species was first introduced in late 18th century by the British looking for a source of high-quality timber to use in shipbuilding and other industries.

1. **Appearance:** The wood density ranges from 0.6 to 0.85, depending on locality. The sapwood is pinkish-tan in colour and the heartwood an attractive dark red-brown.

2. **Timber purpose:** It is favoured for furniture, high-class joinery, trim and boat building. The wood is also used locally for railroad ties, flooring and veneer. Because of its decorative appearance, the wood of Khaya is a very popular timber.

3. **Adaptability:** It thrives in arid and semi-arid regions with minimal water requirements.This species is known for its ability to **thrive in dry zones** and can withstand **moderate water deficits** by reducing transpiration and increasing root growth. It grows best in regions with a **mean annual temperature of 24.5–31.5°C** and can tolerate **high temperatures up to 42°C.**

Agro-Climatic Requirements

Climate: Suited for tropical and sub-tropical climates with annual rainfall between 600–1200 mm. The species can grow well in temperatures ranging from 25°C to 40°C. It prefers well-drained sandy loam to clayey soils; tolerates low fertility and lateritic conditions. **This species c**an be cultivated up to 1200 meters above sea level.

Propagation

Seeds can remain viable for a year or more, but germination is much better from seed sown fresh, when it can often be nearly 100%. Sowing in lightly shaded nursery seedbeds has been shown to give better results than sowing in containers. Germination can begin in about 3 weeks. The softwood cuttings are the most suitable when compared to hardwood and semi-hardwood cuttings. Cuttings treated with IBA (Indole-3 Butyric Acid) at a concentration of 2000 mgl-1 root well. Germination takes place within 20-40 days. Apical buds or shoot tips are the ideal explants for in vitro propagation.

Planting Techniques

- **Land Preparation:** Pits of 45 cm^3 are dug and filled with a mixture of soil, compost, and sand.

- **Spacing**: Maintain 4–6 meters between trees for optimal growth and canopy development and 4 m × 4 m for timber production; closer spacing (3 m × 3 m) for reclamation purposes.

- **Time of Planting**: Plant at the onset of the rainy season to ensure adequate water for

establishment. Best planted at the onset of monsoon (June–July) in India.

- **Method**: Dig planting holes 30–40 cm deep, and fill with a mix of soil and organic compost before planting seedlings.

Fertilization

Compost provides slow-release nutrients and improves soil structure. Application of NPK in the ratio of 10:10:10 or 20:10:10 which supports healthy growth

Pests and Diseases

In its natural range, Khaya can be severely attacked by shoot borers (*Hypsipyla robusta*). Such attacks may result in misshapen trees with no timber value. The sapwood is susceptible to attack by long-horn beetles and powder post beetles (Lyctus spp.). A bacterial disease of dry-zone mahogany caused by *Xanthomonus khaye* results in rough, scabby leaf spots and knobby stem cankers.

Pest control and Disease management

- Regularly inspect your plant for signs of infestation.
- Use insecticidal soap or neem oil as a natural remedy if pests are detected.

Wood characteristics

Timber of *K. senegalensis* is highly valued because of its beautiful figurative grain and its rich reddish mahogany brown colour. It reputedly has the best surface-finishing of all the African mahogany timber species and is used for quality furniture and cabinetwork, joinery, fixtures, flooring, boat building, decorative veneers, construction and even for manufacture of household utensils. In Burkina Faso its timber is used in traditional handicrafts and in parts of West Africa it is reputedly used as a source of fibre for pulp production (World Agroforestry Centre 2004). On account of the timber's strength and hardness it is a popular timber in East Africa for lorry bodies, construction work, and decking in boats.

Utilization

In its natural range *K. sengalensis* provides cattle fodder, edible and cosmetic oils, medicinal products, shade and shelter as well as providing fuelwood and valuable timber. In Mali, Niger and parts of the Sahel *K. sengalensis* rates highly as an agroforestry tree species, based on farmers' preferences, market demand and potential for genetic improvement (Franzel *et al.* 1996). As an exotic, it is valued for both amenity applications and timber production (CAB International 2000; Robertson 2002; Jøker and Gaméné 2003; World Agroforestry Centre 2004).

CONCLUSION

Khaya senegalensis has long been recognized as a valuable multipurpose tree in its native African range. For over five decades, it has also been introduced and trialed in Asia as an exotic species for plantations and urban landscaping. In recent years, its commercial potential as a high-value timber species has gained increasing attention. With the growing global demand for premium-quality cabinet and joinery timbers particularly in emerging markets such as China The importance of alternative plantation-grown hardwoods is rising. Concurrently, the scarcity and rising costs of traditional luxury timbers like American mahogany along with international conservation efforts to reduce reliance on natural forest hardwoods are creating significant market opportunities for sustainable plantation-sourced timbers such as *K. senegalensis*.

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