

Neem (*Azadirachta indica*)

Scientific classification

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| Kingdom: | Plantae |
| Division: | Magnoliophyta |
| Order: | Sapindales |
| Family: | Meliaceae |
| Genus: | <i>Azadirachta</i> |
| Species: | <i>A. indica</i> |



Origin

The exact native range of this species is obscure, but it is thought to be native to the Indian Sub-continent (India and Bangladesh) and South-east Asia.

Naturalised distribution (global)

Locations within which *Azadirachta indica* is naturalised include northern Australia, tropical Asia, Africa, Fiji, Mauritius, Puerto Rico, the Caribbean and many countries in South and Central America.

Introduced, naturalised or invasive in East Africa

Azadirachta indica is invasive in parts of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda (A.B.R. Witt pers. obs.). It is a serious problem along parts of the Kenyan and Tanzanian coasts and it is spreading rapidly.

Habitat

Azadirachta indica can invade shrublands, open woodlands, grasslands, floodplains, riparian zones (banks of watercourses), coastal sites and other disturbed natural vegetation.

Description

Azadirachta indica is a fast-growing tree that can reach a height of 15-20 m, though it occasionally reaches 35-40 m. It is evergreen, but in severe drought it may shed most or nearly all of its leaves. The branches are spread wide. The fairly dense crown is roundish or oval and may reach the diameter of 15-20 m in old, free-standing specimens. At low altitude and hot/ humid or hot dry environments in Uganda it grows slowly, hardly attaining 10m height (D.L.N. Hafashimana pers. comm.).

The opposite, simple pinnate (once-divided) leaves are 20-40 cm long, with 20-31 medium to dark green leaflets about 3-8 cm long. The leaf stalks (petioles) are short. Very young leaves are reddish to purplish in colour. The shape of mature leaflets is more or less asymmetric and their margins are toothed (dentate).

The white and fragrant flowers arise from the junction of the stem and petiole (are arranged axillary), normally in more-or-less drooping flower clusters (panicles) which are up to 25 cm long. These branching inflorescences, bear from 150 to 250 flowers. An individual flower is 5-6 mm long and 8-11 mm wide.

The fruit is a smooth (glabrous) olive-like drupe which varies in shape from elongate oval to nearly roundish, and when ripe are 1.4-2.8 x 1.0-1.5 cm. The fruit skin is thin and turns yellow when ripe. The bitter-sweet pulp is yellowish-white and very fibrous. The pulp is 0.3-0.5 cm thick. The white, hard inner shell of the fruit encloses one, rarely two or three, elongated seeds (kernels) having a brown seed coat. Birds are known to gorge themselves on the fruits but they are extremely poisonous to mammals.