

# Outeniqua Yellowwood

*Afrocarpus falcatus*

## Derivation of names.

***Afrocarpus*** is a genus of conifers belonging to the podocarp family - Podocarpaceae.

Prior to 1989 Outeniqua Yellowwood was known as *Podocarpus falcatus*. *Podocarpus* is from Greek *podos*, a foot and *carpo*, fruit, referring to the fleshy foot stalk of the fruit, very readily seen with the Illiwarra Plum *Podocarpus elatus*, where the fleshy stem is plum coloured and edible, in fact quite tasty. In the late 1980's several African species formerly classified in the Genus *Podocarpus* were reclassified. The reason for the separation is mainly based on the absence of a fleshy receptacle at the base of the seed. These species are often seen as an enigma. Although they have normal leaves and fruit which look like those of an Olive, they are classified as gymnosperms, and therefore are related to all of the conifers. The botanical reason for this is that they are all said to have naked seeds, unlike the typical fruit of a true flowering plant, which has seeds enclosed within a fruit, e.g. apple.

The specific name is from Latin meaning sickle shaped referring to the shape of the leaves. Outeniqua is derived from the region of the Outeniqua Mountain Range in the southern part of South Africa, one of the areas of the trees natural habitat.

## Other names.

Podo, Yellowwood, East African Yellowwood, Bastard Yellowwood.

## The Tree.

Both *Podocarpus* and *Afrocarpus* are protected in South Africa. *Afrocarpus falcatus* is a tall evergreen conifer often growing up to about forty-five meters tall, but known to have reached 60 meters. At higher elevations and in exposed, coastal habitat it rarely exceeds 25 meters tall. The trunk can be two



to three meters wide. Yellowwood is one of the tallest and largest trees in South Africa, and some have been designated by the Department of Water and Forests as Champion Trees, including the Eastern Monarch at thirty-nine metres. Of interest, the tallest tree in South Africa is a Sydney Blue Gum (*Eucalyptus saligna*) at 79 meters. *Afrocarpus* includes the largest known podocarps outside of New Zealand where Totara (*Podocarpus totara*) is substantially larger. The tree was heavily exploited in earlier days and the 'giants' were felled for timber, thus the lack of large trees and therefore its protected status today.



The tree has a beautiful form. The flush of bluish-grey leaves in spring contrast beautifully against the older, dark green, mature leaves. The leaves are arranged spirally, with parallel veins and smooth margins. The leaf is curved with a tip which is sharply pointed (falcate) thus the specific name *falcatus*. The leaves are arranged in spirals on the branches. They are small and narrow, up to 4.5 centimeters long by about 6 millimeters wide. They are green to yellowish, hairless, and leathery and somewhat waxy in texture. The bark is interesting, being smooth and ridged on younger stems and peeling off in flakes on the older trees.

Yellowwood is a dioecious species, with male and female flowers on separate plants. The male cone is brown with spiralling scales and measures five to fifteen millimeters long by three millimeters wide. It grows from the leaf axils. The female cone has one scale bearing one seed between one and two centimeters long. The gray-green seed is drupe-like with a woody coat covered in a fleshy, resinous skin. The Waite Arboretum has two female specimens on the eastern boundary of the lake, both of which currently have some fruit. One has some large fruit, more than 20mm in diameter showing the thick fleshy outer covering. This pair of trees is separated by an Australian Podocarp – Illawarra Plum (*Podocarpus elatus*), which easily shows the similarities.

The trees bear fruit irregularly, only every few years. The main agents of seed dispersal are fruit bats, which eat the fleshy covering and discard the woody seed. Many birds, animals and rodents feed on the fruits. These may not be effective seed dispersal agents, because it appears that seeds that have been digested in this manner do not germinate well. In order to propagate new plants it is very important to remove the fleshy part manually as it contains an inhibitor, which seems to suppress germination.

## Natural distribution

This tree occurs from the southern Cape, northwards to the Limpopo (the northern most region of South Africa) and also eastwards to Mozambique. Some of the largest individuals occur in the Knysna-Amatole montane forests, where some specimens are over 1000 years old.

## Uses and economic value

The tree is valued very highly as a garden plant. The wood is very similar in appearance to Australia's Yellow-wood (*Flindersia xanthoxyla*). The accompanying photo of the slab of wood is from a piece that Tony Davies (Northern turners) sourced.



The colour is pale yellowish with little difference between the heartwood and the sapwood. The wood has a fine even grain and is of moderate weight – about 670 kgm per cubic meter (c.f. most pines – about 550 to 600 kgm per cub. meter). It was used extensively for furniture, roof beams, floorboards, door and window frames and boat building. Some of the famous yellowwood antiques seen throughout South Africa were made from the wood of this specific tree. The straight stems of these trees were once used for the topmasts of ships. The bark is used for tanning leather.

## References

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Trees of Southern Africa, Keith Coates Palgrave, C Struik Publishers, Cape Town, 1983

Plantzafrica - [www.plantzafrica.com/plantnop/podocarpfalc.htm](http://www.plantzafrica.com/plantnop/podocarpfalc.htm)

The Gymnosperm Database. [www.conifers.org/po/Afrocarpus\\_falcatus.php](http://www.conifers.org/po/Afrocarpus_falcatus.php)

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