

A tree for decorative body art

The henna tree has been valued since ancient times for cosmetic purposes

By FRANCIS GACHATHI

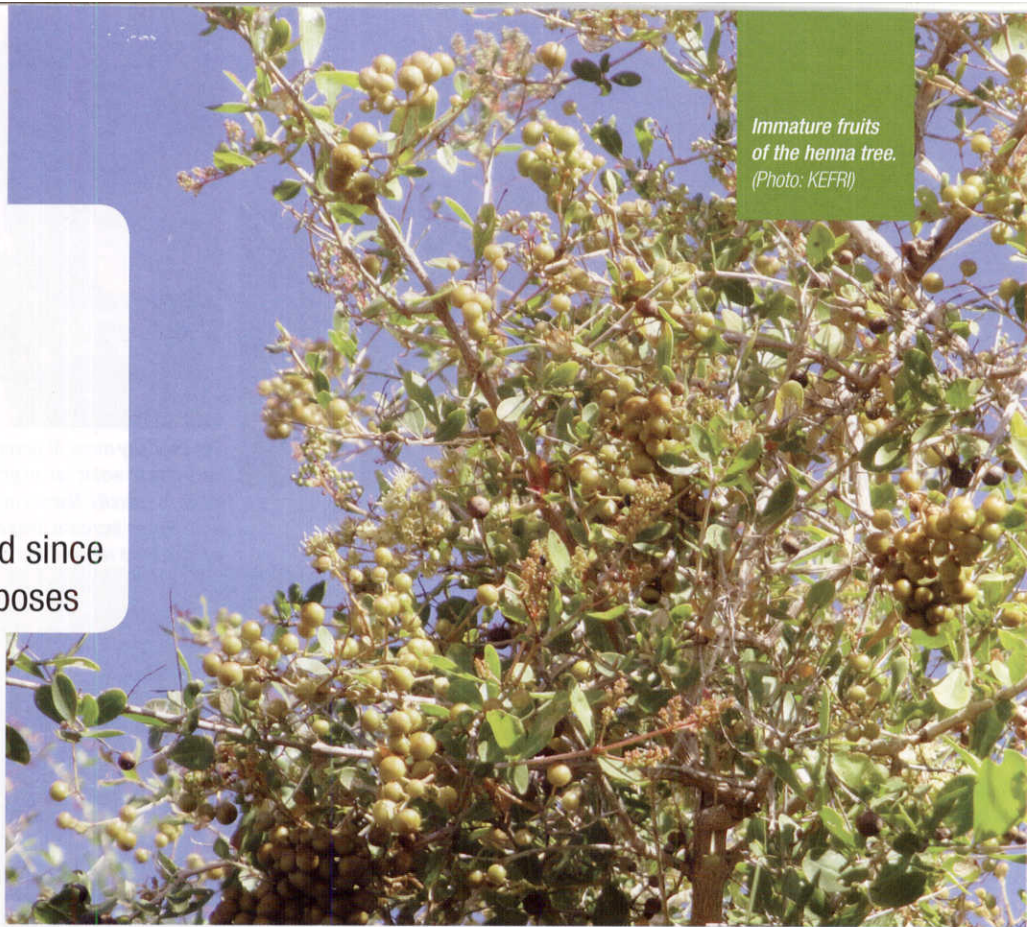
Among the important cosmetic and perfume plants of the Hebrews was the henna tree, *Lawsonia inermis*. Its first mention in the Bible is in the Song of Solomon 1:14 "My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of En-Gedi." It is also mentioned with other sweet-smelling plants; spikenard, saffron, calamus, cinnamon, frankincense, myrrh and aloe (Song of Solomon, 4:12-14).

Henna has been cultivated in the Middle East countries from ancient times. Its powdered leaves and young shoots were used to make an orange-red dye used in finely detailed body art on finger-nails, toe-nails, palms of the hands and soles of the feet of young women. Men used it to colour their beards and the manes and tails of their horses.

Flowers were used to prepare a strongly fragrant oil used in scent-making and as an ointment. Egyptian mummies were swathed in cloth dyed with henna. It was grown as a hedgerow around vineyards to hold soil against wind erosion and protect the valuable crop from animals.

Lawsonia inermis, which belongs to the plant family *Lythraceae*, is a much branched shrub or small tree that grows up to 4m high. It has short side shoots often ending into a spine. Leaves are opposite, oval, up to 5cm long and usually tinged reddish brown when young. Flowers are creamy-white, sweet-scented, in clusters of large masses. Fruits are small round reddish-yellow capsules about 6mm across with persistent style, numerous tiny seeds, splitting into four sections when mature.

The plant is widely distributed from North Africa and the Middle East to West and Central Africa. It is commercially cultivated in many parts of the world as a dye, for use in perfumery and as an ointment. Use of henna in body artwork is still a popular beauty technique in parts of Asia, Africa and the Middle East. It is also widely used for tinting hair. Major henna producing countries include India, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkey, Libya, Egypt, Somalia, Yemen and Sudan.



Immature fruits of the henna tree. (Photo: KEFRI)



A hedge row composed of henna shrubs. (Photo: KEFRI)

In Kenya, *Lawsonia inermis* is common in the coastal bushland and in the semi arid areas, mostly restricted to water courses and flood plains, an indicator for high water table and useful river-bank stabiliser. Local names attributed to the henna tree include mkokoa, mhina (Swahili); mvumanyuki (Bajun); elmi (Boran); kitiliku (Kamba); elan (Somali); mugokora (Tharaka); esajait (Turkana); muasimini (Pokomo) and kaparamenion (Pokot).

The plant has many local uses. Among the Swahili and Arabs, women decorate their bodies with henna during festivities such as weddings. Brides in particular make elaborate decorations. This practice is also common among the Borana and Somali of northern Kenya.

Men use henna to dye beards and hair. The

orange-red dye is made by crushing dried leaves and young shoots into a fine green powder. Strong tea and lemon juice are added to make a paste for use. The dye is also used to decorate fabrics and leather.

Lawsonia inermis wood is used for firewood, simple construction, spear shafts, bows and arrows. The flexible light withies are used to make beds and chairs as well as baskets and carriers for use on donkeys. It is a valuable fodder especially for goats and camels and excellent bee forage. The roots and bark are used to treat various ailments and conditions. It is often planted from cuttings for live-fencing around homes.

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