Kei apple

Dovyalis caffra

Kei apple plant, botanically known as part of Dovyalis caffra or Iberia caffra is a sub-tropical, evergreen fruit tree or shrub, and a member of the Flacourtiaceae or Placourtia family. Botanically speaking it is a berry though appearance-wise it looks more like an apricot and flavor-wise compared to citrus as a result of its high acidity. The plant is native to southern region of Africa including Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland and Zimbabwe. Its distribution extends from the Kei River in the south, from which the common name derives, northwards along the eastern side of the continent to Tanzania. Some of the popular common names of the plant are **Kei apple, Putukila, Umqokolo, Umkokola, kau apple, Kayaba, Wild Apricot and Kai apple**.

The name 'Dovyalis' is based on the Greek word for 'spear' and 'caffra' comes from Kaffraria (Eastern Cape, South Africa). When not in flower or fruit, this species is sometimes confused with D. zeyheri. It is grown as a coastal hedge and ornamental in southern California and the Mediterranean and for the fruit, it provides in

parts of Africa. Its popularity as a fresh eating fruit is limited due to its highly acidic flavor and as a result of the plants thorns which make it difficult to harvest. These thorns do however make it ideal for use as a natural fence capable of providing a barrier for protection from wild animals and intruders. As a coastal hedge, it additionally aids in the prevention of Cliffside erosion and desertification.

Kei apple has a rounded shape and petite size measuring around 6 cm in diameter. When ripe the tough skin of the Kei apple turns from green to yellow-orange and boasts a fuzzy coat, similar to that of a peach. Its flesh is mealy and juicy, like that of an apricot and surrounds two rings of central seeds and can contain anywhere between 5 and 15 seeds total. Its flavor is extremely acidic and for most people needs to be sweetened with sugar prior to consumption. In contrast to its flavor, the Kei apple offers a highly aromatic, sweet aroma when ripe. The tree does not fruit until it is 3 years old. In southern Africa, flowering and fruiting occur from November to January. The flowers are pollinated by insects and fruit take about 4 months to mature.

History

Kei apple tree is native to southwest Africa specifically Namibia and the area around the Kei River, hence its namesake. It first

made its way to England in 1838 than from there to Algeria, southern France, northwestern Australia, Jamaica, Egypt, the Philippines, and in the United States to Florida and California. A subtropical plant the Kei apple can be grown as a small tree or a shrub and is commonly planted to form a hedge. The plant thrives in locations above 2,600 feet and thrives in dry, sandy soils. It can be grown in saline rich soil and locations near the ocean where salty air is prevalent and is highly tolerant of drought. The Kei apple plant also is known to produce a biochemical that can inhibit the growth of other nearby plants, an occurrence known as allelopathy, while this is beneficial for weed abatement, care should be taken not to plant it too close to other fruit or vegetable-bearing plants.

Culinary Uses

- Ripe fruit has a pleasant flavor and is rich in vitamin C. They are eaten fresh or made into jelly and jam.
- Kei-apples are often eaten fresh, or sprinkled with sugar to complement their natural acidity.

- Aside from being eaten fresh, the fruit can be made into jam, used in desserts, or pickled (their natural acidity means vinegar is not needed).

Other facts

- In Kenya, it is mostly used for live fences and hedges.
- Plants have dense spiny shoots that make an impermeable barrier.
- If the fruit is soaked in water and allowed to ferment, the liquid drained off has herbicidal properties.
- Wood is white, dense and heavy; usually too small to be of general use.
- Trunk of Dovyalis caffra serves as a good source of hard wood for fuel, house building and furniture making.
- The leaves are often used as fodder and are browsed by antelope.

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