

Establishment of a modest Tigray botanical garden in Belgium - An illustration of the Afromontane vegetation

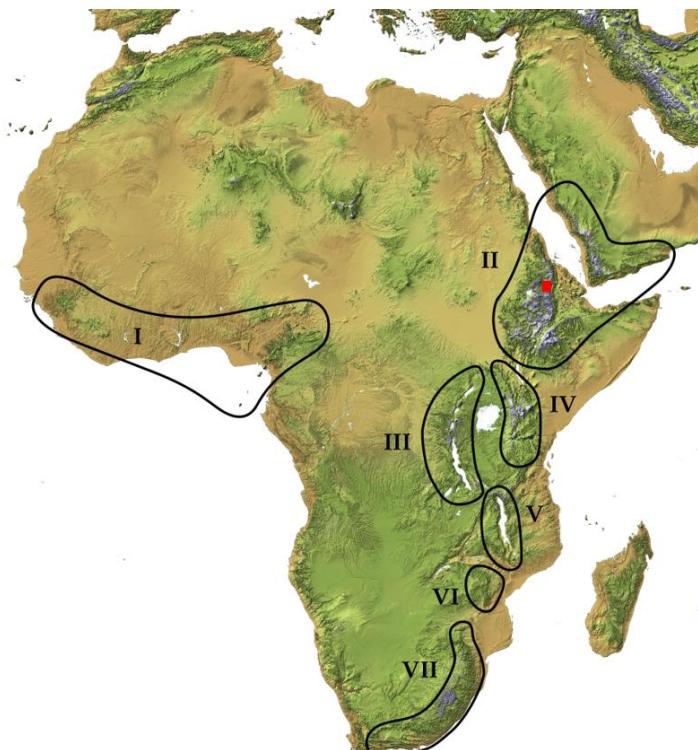
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Abstract

The Afromontane biogeographic region includes plant species found in Africa's highlands. Temperatures in these regions are comparable to those encountered in temperate climates, with the major temperature contrast being between day and night. The Dogu'a Tembien massif in Tigray is a 'sky island', that served as model for the establishment of a modest Afromontane floral park. The garden, dedicated to the slain Tigray people, was established in 2023 and has eleven woody, five herbaceous, one palm and one succulent species. The garden is managed organically, with compost and horse manure used as fertilizers, no herbicides, and only a metaldehyde-based molluscicide. Geomembrane sheets are used to limit the abundant local vegetation, and plant labels are prepared in French with scientific and Tigrinya names in small lettering.



Afromontane vegetation

The vegetation of the Afromontane biogeographic region includes plant species found in Africa's highlands. The Afromontane regions are discontinuous, separated from one another by lower-lying areas, and are distributed as a series of "sky islands" (Grimshaw, 2001). Temperatures in these tropical mountain climates are comparable to those encountered in temperate

Map of the Afromontane regions. The red dot indicates the Dogu'a Tembien sky island that is represented in the botanical garden (Map by Andrew Z. Colvin for Wikimedia Commons)

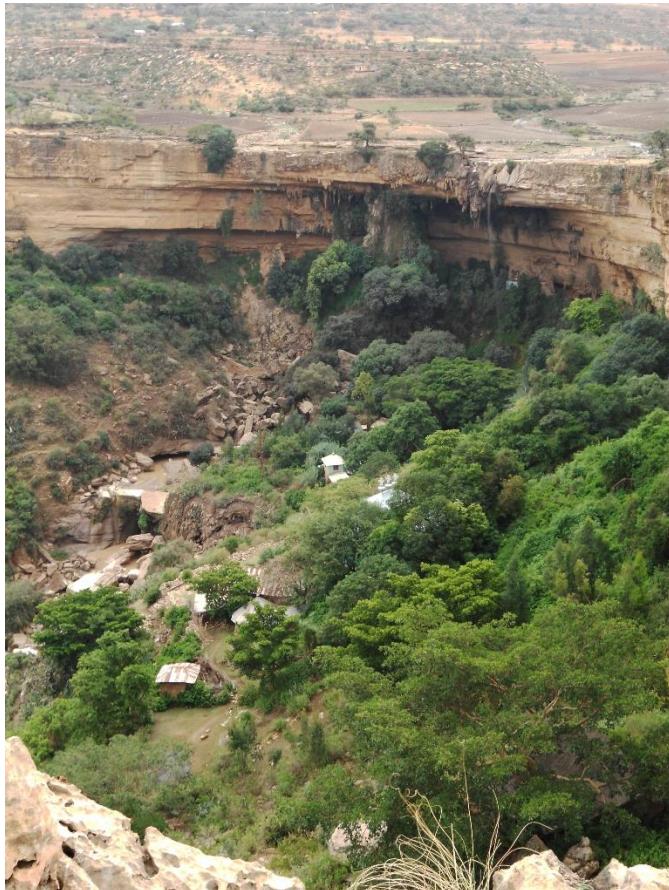
climates, with the major temperature contrast being between day and night rather than seasonal (Dereje Ashebir et al., 2010).

Tigray context

One of these Afromontane regions are the Ethiopian highlands. Zone II looks to be cohesive on the map, but it is actually an 'archipelago' of Afromontane islands (Grimshaw, 2001). The Dogu'a Tembien massif in Tigray is such a sky island, where the author has spent several years living and working.

Tigray has suffered through a brutal war waged on it by the Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Amhara armies (2020-2022), and there is still starvation and extreme insecurity (Luber, 2021). We attempted to build a modest Tigray garden in Belgium as a token of friendship and empathy. Despite the occasional severe

cold in Belgium (at approx. 50°N and 180 metres elevation), the overall temperature similarity with Dogu'a Tembien allowed for the establishment of a modest private botanical garden representing species frequently occurring in Dogu'a Tembien (Tigray).



Remnant forest at the Tinsehe waterfall in Dogu'a Tembien, Tigray (Nyssen et al., 2019a)

compost and horse dung as fertilizers, no herbicides, and only a metaldehyde-based molluscicide. During the summer, geomembranes are used to reduce the abundant local vegetation ("weeds"). The geomembrane sheets are fastened with flintstone mined from a local outcrop of 'flint eluvium' (Bourguignon, 1957; Dusar et al., 2011; Nyssen et al., 2014; Pel, 1960) because it was impossible to carry a sufficient volume of the vast range of Dogu'a Tembien lithology (Nyssen et al., 2019a).

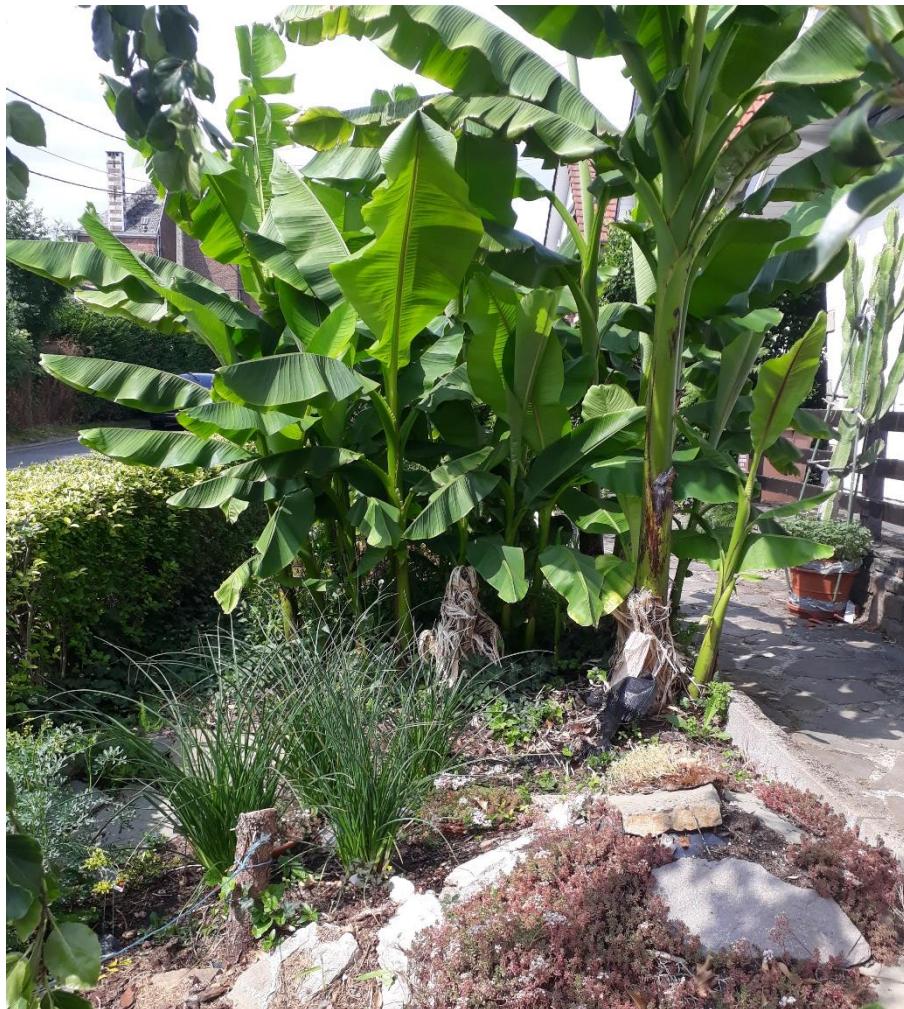
All planted species are very common in Tigray, and one may occasionally find them in gardens in different countries; none of these species are on the IUCN Red List. It is their grouping in this garden that makes it unique, hence the name "Tigray Garden", "Jardin du Tigray" in French, ገደና ተግራይ [gedena tigray] in Tigrinya. "Gedena" points to a spot in the backyard of the farmer's homestead, meant for planting, multiplying and preserving the family's most valued and essential plants and

The Tigray garden

The Tigray garden was established in 2023 near Liège (Belgium). Some species had been planted for many years, while others are recent additions, that have not yet completely grown. The garden holds eleven woody, five herbaceous, one palm and one succulent species and was inaugurated in 2023. Some of the species were brought from Tigray, others obtained in Europe, and for a few, we substituted the Tigray species by a species of the same genus and with the same morphology, that can grow in the Belgian climate.

The garden is managed organically, with

vegetables. I received many other suggestions, including ፍስኬ ቤት [dehri bêt] which points to the broader backyard (Nyssen et al., 2016) and መእከል እስዋት [ma'ekel 'etswat] for botanical garden, which is a bit overdone for this small garden.



View on the Tigray Garden on 4 June 2023.

As the garden is visible to the general public, plant labels are produced in the local French language, with scientific and Tigrinya names written in tiny font.

Bananier <i>Musa basjoo</i> ሙ-ዝ ተምበን [muz tembien]	<i>Jardin du</i> Tigray	Rue <i>Ruta graveolens</i> ሮኑ አድማ [ch'enna-addam]	<i>Jardin du</i> Tigray
Cédratier <i>Citrus medica</i> ትሩንግዴ [trunghi]	<i>Jardin du</i> Tigray	Olivier brun <i>Olea europaea subsp. cuspidata</i> አው-ለዕ [awli'i]	<i>Jardin du</i> Tigray

Sample of species labels in the Tigray garden, represented at scale 1/3

The next pages give a description of the species planted, their context, and summary of their management in the Belgian climate.

Candela regia

Verbascum sinaiticum

The plant is common in Tigray and endemic to the Horn of Africa and SW Asia. The plant has multiple uses in traditional medicine (Teklay et al., 2013); its roots have antibacterial properties (Yeabyo et al., 2018). In traditional veterinary use, it is administered against anthrax, and the leaves may be tied around animal legs to cure dislocated bones (Teklay, 2015).

In Tigrinya : ታርናኩ, ተርናቸ [tirnakha, t'irnaqa] (November et al., 2002), አንዳጋ [handega] (Teklay et al., 2013).



Substituted by *Verbascum chaixii* in the Tigray garden (Belgium) (July 2023)



Verbascum sinaiticum on Mt. Hermon (Lebanon)

Plants purchased from Willemse nursery (France) through mail order in 2023. *Verbascum sinaiticum* would not resist the cold winters in Belgium, hence we opted for the very similar *V. nigrum*. The nursery sent the white-flowering *V. chaixii* instead, a typical ruderal species of southwest Europe (Brandes, 2009).

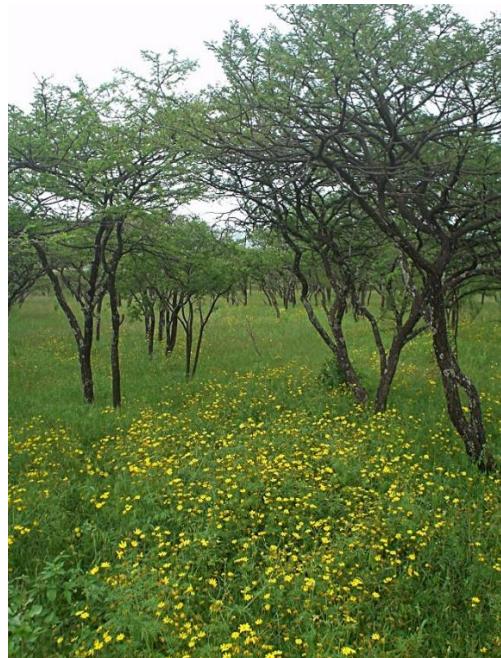
Meskel flower

Bidens macroptera

By the mid of September, near the end of the rainy season, Tigray's landscapes are green, with large spots of bright yellow Meskel flowers, named after the Meskel holiday that is celebrated at the end of September. The *Bidens* genus is widespread all over Africa, and beyond (Tadesse, 1993). In Tigrinya : ገልጊል መሳቀል [gilgile meskel] (November et al., 2002).



In the Tigray garden (Belgium), *Bidens macroptera* is substituted by *B. ferulifolia* (June 2023)



Typical growth of *Bidens macroptera* under an *Acacia* cover in Tigray in September (Miheni enclosure) (Aerts, 2019)

Plants purchased in 2023 from Home Meets Nature (The Netherlands) through mail order. Annual plant, may disperse its seeds.

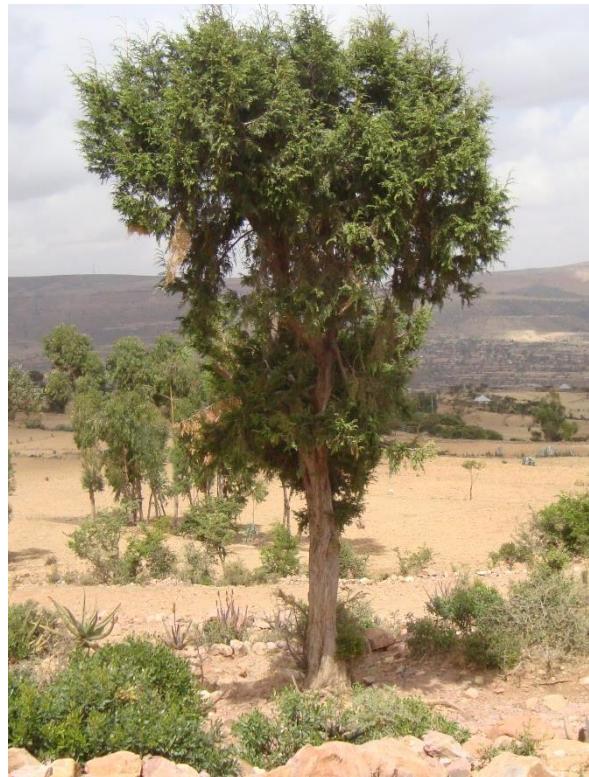
East African cedar

Juniperus procera

A coniferous tree native to mountainous areas in Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. It is a characteristic tree of the Afromontane flora. It often reaches a height of 25 metres (Adams, 2004). In Tigrinya : ታሸዢ [tsihdi] (Reubens et al., 2011).



Substituted by the winterhard *Juniperus communis* in the Tigray garden (Belgium) (May 2023)



Juniperus procera (Awulo, Tigray, 2023)

Juniperus communis obtained from a nursery in Belgium, and planted around the year 2000.

Tembien banana

Banana plants grown traditionally in Tigray and the wider Ethiopia are of local cultivars (Asmare Dagnew et al., 2021), which produce short and very tasty bananas, internationally called “apple banana” (Onyango et al., 2008).

In Tigrinya : ሙዘን ዓዲ [muz ‘addi] (local banana) or ሙዘን ተምበን [muz tembien] (Tembien banana), in contrast to the commercial banana ሙዘን ፍረገኝ, “banana from abroad”. The “local” banana species reached Tigray between 700 and 1100 CE, originating from Taiwan and the Philippines (Watson, 1983), the “foreigners’ bananas” (mainly Cavendish) came in a recent wave after a detour through Latin America (Wakuma Biratu et al., 2022).

The Tembien banana cultivar was identified as “Bluggoe” (genome ABB) (Lim, 2012) by banana researcher Roni Swennen (IITA). It is one of the best drought tolerant starchy bananas. The cultivar has been studied in detail in deep valleys in Oman (Behrendt et al., 2015), where it similarly has a very good taste, presumably due to the specific environmental conditions. Note that Oman is along the trade route from SE Asia to the Horn of Africa.

Musa acuminata × M. balbisiana (Bluggoe subgroup)



The Tigrayan “local banana” plants were substituted by the winterhard *M. basjoo* in the Tigray Garden (Belgium) (June 2023)



Tembien banana tree (Abiy Addi, Tigray) and a bunch of Tembien bananas with pen for scale (Photos Seifu Gebreselassie and Sarah Tewoldeberhan, May 2023)

The shoots of *M. basjoo* planted in the Tigray garden were obtained in 1992 from a hobby gardener in Liège (Belgium). The plant was grown in pot until 1995. Planted in full ground in 1996. Every winter the foot is covered with decayed leaves and straw. Re-emerges in spring and produces small fruits by August-September. Vegetative multiplication.

Rue, herb-of-grace

Ruta graveolens

Rue is grown as culinary herb and medicinal plant in Tigray (Teklay et al., 2013; Teklit Gebregiorgis, 2015). It is also cultivated as an ornamental plant, and as an insect repellent and incense. The plant is native to the Balkans, and may be found in traditionally managed gardens in Belgium.

In Tigrinya : ኔኑን አዲም [ch'enna-addam] (November et al., 2002).



Herb-of-grace in the Tigray garden (Belgium)
(July 2023)



Herb of grace in Mekelle (Tigray)
(Teklit Gebregiorgis, 2015)

Plant obtained from a hobby gardener in Liège (Belgium) in 2023. Grows in full ground; winterhard.

CARE: urticant

Tree heath

Erica arborea

In Tigray, heath trees can be up to 10 m high. They form the upper tree belt on Tigray's highest mountains. For instance, the upper tree line is at 3700 m on Ferrah Imba, the peak of Tigray (Jacob, 2015). *Erica arborea* has a large distribution from the Mediterranean maquis to Afromontane ecosystems. The *E. arborea* populations in these areas have been separated for a long time, hence there may be genetic variants with possible different ecological behaviour (pers. comm., B. Muys, 2023).

In Tigrinya : ሽቅቶ [shaqto], አስተ [hasti] (November et al., 2002).



Tree heath in the Tigray garden (Belgium) (July 2023)



Tree heath on Dabba Selama mountain at 2646 m, Dogu'a Tembien, Tigray

Plants purchased from Esveld nursery (The Netherlands) through mail order in 2023. Reputedly grows in full ground without reproduction. Said to reach up to 2 m high in the Belgian climate. The planted variety is expected to be of Mediterranean origin and may have characteristics that are slightly different from the Tigrayan variety (McGuire and Kron, 2005). It resists frost up to minus 10°C (successful stress test at -6°C in 2023).

Citron or cedrate

Citrus medica

A variety of lemon that is widespread in the Middle East and also in Tigray (Alemtsehay Tsegay et al., 2019). It is a large fragrant citrus fruit, a huge, rough lemon with a thick rind, which is consumed. It is one of the original citrus fruits from which all other citrus types developed through natural hybrid speciation or artificial hybridization (Klein, 2014).

In Tigrinya : ታኅንግ [trunghi].



Citrus medica in the Tigray garden
(Belgium) (July 2023)



Citrus medica tree in Israel, where it is called "etrog"
(<https://gardening.stackexchange.com>)

Tree purchased from Plantencentrum Exotica (Belgium) through mail order. Grown in pot, and transferred to frost-free environment from 1 November till the end of April.

African wild olive

Olea europaea subsp. *cuspidata*

The wild olive tree is very useful for dryland restoration, as it is drought and frost resistant (Aerts et al., 2008). The tree is also harvested (and over-exploited) for its durable timber. The leaves make good livestock fodder during the dry season and when burnt, the smoke from its leaves and stem is being used to fumigate food and liquid containers. Root and bark are used to treat malaria (Teklay et al., 2013). Because of the many uses of this tree, it has been over-harvested dramatically in Tigray (www.weforest.org).

In Tigrinya : አውላዕ [awli'i] (Reubens et al., 2011).



African wild olive in the Tigray garden
(Belgium) (July 2023)



African wild olive tree near the edge of Des'a forest in Tigray

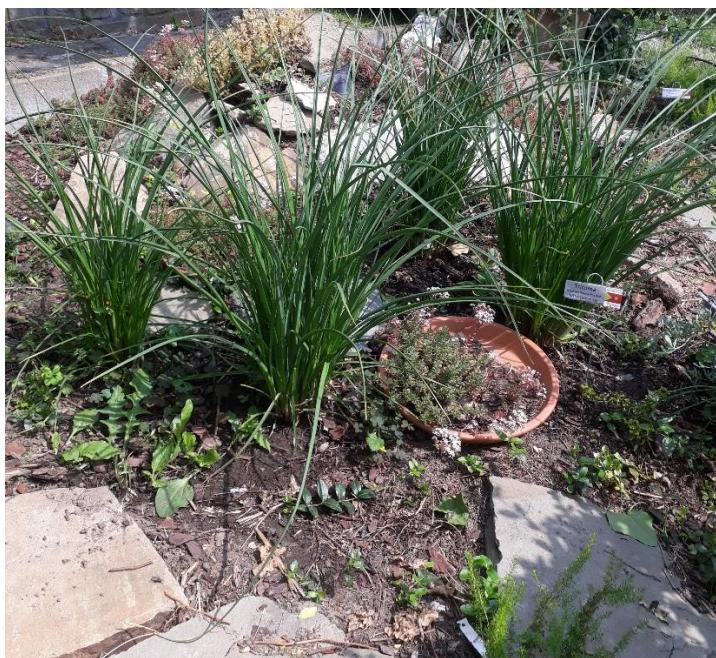
Tree obtained from the May Zahla nursery in Dingile (Tigray). Grown in pot, and transferred to frost-free environment from 1 November till the end of April. The tree sheds nearly all its leaves in winter, presumably due to poor light conditions.

Red hot pokers

Kniphofia foliosa

Five endemic Kniphofia species are known in Ethiopia; they most often grow in wet and stony habitats (Tilahun Teklehaymanot et al., 2008). Annually the Ashenda festival (named after this plant) is organised in almost all villages and towns of Tigray, which empowers, inspires and provides freedom to women and girls (who wear a skirt prepared from *Kniphofia* leaves over their clothes) in a society that traditionally subordinates them (Selam Balehey and Mulubrhan Balehegn, 2019).

In Tigrinya : አሻንዳ [ashenda] (November et al., 2002).



Substituted by *Kniphofia* 'Papaya Popsicle' in the Tigray garden (Belgium) (July 2023)



Ashenda along the Rift Valley escarpment (photo Tesfa Tours)

Plants purchased from Esveld nursery (The Netherlands) through mail order. Reputedly grows in full ground in the Belgian climate with vegetative reproduction.

Candelabra tree

Euphorbia candelabrum

Euphorbia candelabrum is one of the species that dominates a major vegetation type occurring in Tigray, i.e., montane evergreen thicket and scrub with on shallow soils (Aerts et al., 2004). Though of a totally different family, this tree shows isomorphism with cacti as in Arizona – the two species, on different continents, evolved into similar morphology with succulent stems and spines, given similar environmental conditions (Meyen, 1973). Cacti are from the Americas and have single spines, or grouped in cluster, while euphorbias (from Afro-Eurasia) have twin spines. The latex is used as medicine for various diseases, and also as a base for ointments (mixed with other herbs) (Teklay et al., 2013).

In Tigrinya : ቁወልዋል [qwolqwal] ; as the plant produces latex when damaged, it is also called "qwolqwal demay", where "demay" means 'bleeding' (Reubens et al., 2011).



Euphorbia candelabrum in the Tigray garden (Belgium) (May 2023)



Euphorbia candelabrum near Abune Ayezgi church in Haddinnet (Dogu'a Tembien, Tigray, 2017).

A branch was taken from a tree in Addi Qoylo (Tigray) and potted around 2014. Vegetative multiplication. Grown in pot, and transferred to a frost-free environment from 1 November till the beginning of May.

CARE: urticant

Jacaranda

Jacaranda mimosifolia

Though jacaranda originates from Brazil, it is a popular ornamental tree in Tigray. It grows in most soils, prefers highland areas but can also grow in drier places (Bekele-Tesemma and Tengnäs, 2007). Jacaranda may not be deemed naturalised or invasive in Tigray since it requires human assistance for reproduction (unlike in Tanzania or South Africa), yet it uses a lot of ground water (phreatophyte) (Versfeld et al., 1998).

In Tigrinya : ዳካራንዳ [djakaranda].



Jacaranda in the Tigray garden
(Belgium) (July 2023)



Jacaranda trees in a street of Mekelle (photo Olav Greve)

Tree purchased from a nursery in Mekelle (Tigray) around 2015. Permanently grown in pot, and transferred to a frost-free environment from 1 November till the beginning of May. We managed to obtain lush vegetative growth but no flowers, so far.

Buckthorn

Rhamnus prinoides

Gesho (*Rhamnus prinoides*) is a perennial shrub or bushy tree with red berries, that naturally grows near streams or along forest margins (Pankhurst, 2005). It is commonly cultivated in backyards and is one of the basic ingredients of *siwa*, the Tigrayan local beer, in addition to water, a home-baked and toasted flat bread and some yeast (*Saccharomyces cerevisiae*). The dried leaves of *gesho* serve as a catalyser (Lee et al., 2015). Gesho leaves are harvested by hand-picking or by cutting together with adjacent shoots. After the leaves are collected, they are dried in the sun; after sun-drying, the quality of the leaves is judged from its colour, which should be green-yellowish (Abadi Girmay, 2015).

In Tigrinya : ገሻ [gesho] (November et al., 2002; Reubens et al., 2011).



Rhamnus alaternus as a substitute for *gesho* in the Tigray garden (Belgium) (June 2023)



Rhamnus prinoides leaves and drupes (stone fruits) (Abadi Girmay, 2015)

Growing *gesho* in Belgium would be impossible in full ground. In our garden, we substituted it with Mediterranean buckthorn (*Rhamnus alaternus*), another species of the same genus, which is said to support frost up to -3°C. It will be covered by an amovable greenhouse in winter. As a back-up some additional plants will be kept in pot in a warmer place during winter. The *Rhamnus alaternus* was obtained from TheOriginalGarden in Miramar (Valencia, Spain).

Winter thorn

Faidherbia albida

Faidherbia albida ("momona") is a typical scattered tree on farmlands in Tigray. It is highly valued in traditional agroforestry systems, because on the one hand (as all leguminous trees) it is a nitrogen fixer, enhancing soil fertility in its surroundings. And on the other hand, it sheds its leaves during the crop growing season (rainy season) so that it does not compete with the crops (Yikunoamlak Gebrewahid et al., 2018). Note that the rainy season in Tigray is in the summer (we are in the northern hemisphere), but a popular mistake is to associate it to winter because clouds and rain make it the coldest season in daytime.

In Tigrinya : በሙና [momona] (November et al., 2002; Reubens et al., 2011).



Robinia pseudoacacia as a substitute for *momona* in the Tigray garden (Belgium) (May 2023)



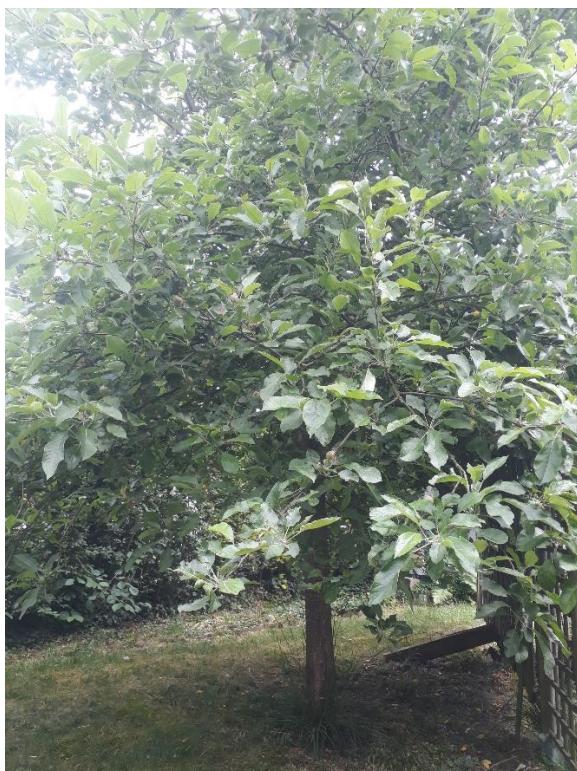
Momona at May Shewate, Hech'i, Tigray (2005).

Growing *Faidherbia albida* in Belgium would be impossible in full ground; it would require a large greenhouse. In our garden, we substituted it with another leguminous tree, *Robinia pseudoacacia*, popularly called "acacia", which sheds its leaves in winter and which allows pruning to obtain a typical acacia savannah tree shape. Both species are thorny. The robinia was obtained from the Amazonia plant shop in Rocourt (Belgium) around 2010.

Apple

Malus domestica

Apple trees have been introduced into the tropical mountains of Tigray, in Adigrat first, by Italian missionaries around 1980, in Wukro around 2000, and in Mekelle and Hagere Selam in 2002 at our initiative (Dereje Ashebir et al., 2010). Building on this expertise, the Relief Society of Tigray further introduced the Ana cultivar to many highland areas in Tigray. Although seasonal temperature amplitudes are still too low to obtain effective winter chilling (Tromp et al., 2005) at these high elevations in the tropics, average temperatures are lower, making it simpler to approach chilling conditions (Osborne, 2000). Warm winters cause apple trees to hibernate for an extended period, which causes poor blossoming, extremely vigorous upward growth, unsynchronized phenology, and low yields (Cook and Jacobs, 2000). The strategy used is to discontinue watering the trees, which is followed by hand defoliation (Diaz et al., 1987; Jones, 1987). After harvest, defoliation—the removal of mature foliage—prevents the buds from going into endo-dormancy and instead encourages them to develop again (Tromp et al., 2005). Most apple trees around Hagere Selam are taken care of in this manner (Dereje Ashebir et al., 2010). In Tigrinya : አጥል [appel] or ሙላ [mèla].



Medium stem apple tree (Belle-Fleur cultivar) in the Tigray garden (Belgium) (June 2023)



Apple trees at May Zahla Experimental Orchard near Hagere Selam in 2007. Cultivars introduced and tested are Golden Delicious, Granny Smith, Jonagold and Gala Must. Given the need for hand defoliation, only short stem trees were introduced to Tigray.

Apple trees in Belgium are typically grown in full ground without irrigation. Traditionally in the surrounding vegetable and fruit growing area, they had been planted as tall stem. Here we have opted for medium stem, for easier management and access, while keeping the ground free for other activities. A traditional *Belle-Fleur* cultivar (Lateur et al., 2000) was planted around 2010, obtained from Frijns Nursery in Groot-Welsden (The Netherlands), which supplied also the first batches of apple trees planted in Dogu'a Tembien and in Mekelle University's orchard.

Fig tree

Ficus vasta and *F. sur*

Ficus vasta (fig tree), *F. sycomorus* (sycamore) and *F. sur* (Cape fig) are common large wild fig trees from Tigray. They often stand isolated in farmlands, and nearby springs (Etefa Guyassa and Raj, 2013). *F. vasta* grows in or near the Horn of Africa while *F. sur* is widespread across Africa (Berg, 1990). The trees produce small figs which invite the children to climb the trees. These wild edible fruits are however not marketed (Negash Aregay et al., 2017). In Tigray, the tree's latex may be smeared on warts for curing them (Fitsumbirhan Tewelde and Mebrahtom Mesfin, 2020). In Tigrinya : *Ficus vasta* የሰራ [da'iro]; *F. sycomorus* አግላ [sagla]; *F. sur* ንፏ [shafa], ክዶ [kodo] (November et al., 2002; Reubens et al., 2011)



A common fig cultivar (*F. carica*) was planted as a substitute for the large sycamores in the Tigray garden (Belgium) (June 2023)



Ficus vasta at Addi Keshofo, Dogu'a Tembien, Tigray. Cattle in the foreground are grazing the stubble after harvest (Nyssen et al., 2019b).

Growing sycamores or Cape figs in Belgium would require an extremely large greenhouse. In our garden, we substituted it with a Mediterranean species of the same genus, *Ficus carica*, which is winterhard. The common fig plant was obtained from a hobby gardener in our neighbourhood.

Sand olive

Dodonaea viscosa subsp. *angustifolia*

Dodonaea viscosa subsp. *angustifolia* is one of the world's most greatly disseminated transoceanic plants in places with tropical and mediterranean climates (Harrington and Gadek, 2009). In Tigray it is part of the undergrowth of natural forests, but also frequently used for reforestation as the small tree disperses a large number of seeds. It has a strong resistance to drought and poor soil (Aerts et al., 2006). It forms a bush or small tree up to 10 m high.

In Tigrinya : ታሸስ [tahses] (November et al., 2002; Reubens et al., 2011).



Dodonaea viscosa "purpurea" as a substitute for *D. viscosa* subsp. *angustifolia* in the Tigray garden (Belgium) (June 2023)



Tahses at Addi Qwalqwal, Tigray (Etefa Guyassa et al., 2023).

We could not yet obtain a plant of *Dodonaea viscosa* subsp. *angustifolia* from Tigray. In our garden, we substituted it with a cultivar of the same species, *D. viscosa* "purpurea", which supports frost up to -3°C. Leaves turn purple in winter, but otherwise its morphology is very similar to *D. viscosa* subsp. *angustifolia*. It will be covered by an amovible greenhouse in winter. As a back-up some additional plants will be kept in pot in a tepid place during winter. The *Dodonaea viscosa* "purpurea" was obtained from TheOriginalGarden in Miramar (Valencia, Spain).

Sorrel

Rumex nepalensis

Sorrel is very common on valley bottom Vertisols and other humid locations in Tigray; as the plant flowers at the end of the rainy season, its red colour allows visualising the location of seasonal wetlands in the landscape.



Crop cultivation on vertic Cambisols in Harena (Dogu'a Tembien) – all land is cultivated, except two seasonal wetlands (spring areas) that are widely covered with sorrel (dark red colour, indicated by arrows) (Nyssen, 1997). Photo taken in September 1994 during the author's first fieldwork in Tigray.

The native range of this sorrel species (*Rumex nepalensis*) is Southern Asia, Eastern and Southern Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean. It is a perennial and grows primarily in the temperate biome (Kew, 2023). Synonyms: *R. bequaertii*, *R. peregrinus* (Kew, 2023; Nyssen, 1997). Not to be confused with *R. nervosus*, a woody species that is widespread in Tigray (Equar Gebru et al., 2016). The roots of *R. nepalensis* are traditionally used in Tigray in the treatment of infertility, abdominal colic, diarrhea, tonsillitis, and arthritis. They are also used to induce labor and abortions (Leul Kidane et al., 2018; Tefera Belsty et al., 2019).

In Tigrinya : ከምበው [Shimbowa'ita].



Sorrel (*Rumex acetosa*), in the Tigray garden (Belgium) (May 2021)



Rumex nepalensis at Inda Maryam Qorar – the dominant broad-leaved plant (August 1998).

We have not taken the risk of transplanting *R. nepalensis* to Belgium as it might occupy the same habitat as our local *R. acetosa*, and become invasive. The local *R. acetosa* has spontaneously grown in the Tigray garden (Belgium).

Grapes

Vitis vinifera

In Tigray, a homestead or village bar (*inda siwa*) with a yard covered in grapevines (*Vitis vinifera*) is a good place to rest during fieldwork. Little is known about Tigray's traditional vines, that existed long before the recent introduction of modern vineyards such as in Aynalem.

Archaeologists recovered grape seeds in archaeological finds at Bieta Giyergis near Aksum, dating back to the early Aksumite period (100 BCE – 400 CE) (Bard et al., 2000). Wine and (reportedly black) grapes were well-known in Aksum, according to historical sources and illustrations (Pankhurst, 2008; Sulias et al., 2009). Further, in the 18th century, Ch'elekwot was noted for its multiple grapevines at homesteads (Ferret and Galinier, 1847).

Wine production at the time struggled to take off because it's rival *myes* could be made from honey at any time of the year. Wine preservation was difficult by the lack of glass bottles (Pankhurst, 2008).

With the early introduction (Crawford, 2019; Pankhurst, 2008) and reintroduction in the nearby Adwa region by German botanist Schimper (1872), Aksum remained the hotspot for grapes.

Between the 16th and 19th centuries, various travelers made reference to the wineries in the area of Aksum (Sulas et al., 2009). It is also reasonable to suppose that Italian colonizers in the 1930s brought grapevine varieties with them. Hence, there are several probable origins of the vines that are now grown on homesteads in Tigray; they are undoubtedly not "wild" as they only occur at homesteads, and Tigray is also beyond the natural range of wild grape (Sulas et al., 2009).

Unfortunately, we are unaware of any botanical or horticultural research on the grapevine cultivars that are customarily grown on some Tigrayan homesteads. During fieldwork, we observed that regular watering was the major management applied; vines are not pruned.

Barradas (1634) noted already that "the abundant foliage does not permit the force of the sun to warm and ripen [the grapes] well". Beside the shade vines provide and the prestige that comes with having grapes at one's residence, the productivity could be increased by simple pruning at the slack season.

In Tigrinya : ወይኒ [weyni] (November et al., 2002).



Vines (Cabernet-Jura cultivar) in the Tigray garden (Belgium) (July 2023)



Vines at Addiha, a neighbourhood of Mekelle (July 2023). Photo: Desalegn Kiros

The vines in the Tigray garden have been obtained from Dalaheim Castellum winery in Dalhem (Belgium) around 2007 (<https://dalaheim-castellum.eu/>). Grows in full ground, irrigated during dry spells; winterhard. The Cabernet-Jura is a quite recently created hybrid that resists fungus (Pedneault and Provost, 2016); not any herbicide or pesticide is necessary.

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