

IN PRAISE OF EXOTICS

Published courtesy of Forestry News, December 1991

Much has been said and written on introduced tree species. Words like “weeds” and “invasive species” are bandied about whenever introduced species are mentioned, and many people feel they are serving a good cause in speaking against, or condemning, all trees and plants that are not indigenous. Mr Keith Dally, Assistant-Director: Forestry Extension, explains why this attitude actually reflects ignorance of just how much South Africa owes to introduced species.

Every year our indigenous forests are being exploited faster than they can recover. This is not only happening in independent black states and homelands, but in so-called “white” areas as well. In the homelands and other rural areas fuelwood is at a premium, and with the ever increasing growth in population, the demand for wood is also increasing. The indigenous forests cannot even nearly meet the demand and are therefore being denuded inexorably year by year. In some areas these forests have completely disappeared and will never return, unless fenced off and restocked with certain pioneer species, followed later by the introduction of high forest species.

Many white farmers have the good fortune to own farms with large areas of indigenous forests. It is a pity that these farmers are allowed to exploit, cut, denude and burn their forests as they wish - excluding of course, the 51 indigenous species listed in the Forest Act (Act 122 of 1984) - which may only be cut with the Government's permission.

The result is that many farmers exploit their forests with no thought of the future. When leaving

protected trees, they think they are acting as good conservationists, not keeping in mind the gradual removal of trees surrounding the protected species by this way of exploitation. The protected trees then become unnaturally exposed to winds and fire and eventually die. Grazing in such forests prevents regeneration and the forests disappear altogether - a phenomenon already visible in large areas of Natal.

By planting exotic groups of trees that grow many times faster than indigenous trees, however, the pressure on indigenous forests could be relieved.

The black wattle, for example, despite all that is said and written in its disfavour, is one of the few species that provides not only firewood, but also laths and poles for construction as well as protection for livestock. It is actually a remarkable tree, because in many areas, despite no proper management or silvicultural control, it regenerates itself for the benefit of those in need of fuel and timber.

Some conservationists contend that black wattle is a weed. A weed is a plant growing where it is not required or where it is out of control. In most cases, wattle get out of control only due to a lack of sound veld management.

Established wattle, once it is more than three metres high, will never spread if cattle or sheep are allowed to graze the veld because all young plants will be eaten. Wattle will, of course, spread near streams and water and for this reason should not be planted there.

In the past, wattle trees were often planted to serve as wind-breaks, also providing farmers with shelter, firewood for cooking and heating, poles, laths and small wood. Which indigenous species could be grown to compete with wattle in this way?

Let's take a look at the much maligned syringa. This is a beautiful summer shade tree and its wood is not only excellent for firewood but it also produces high-class furniture timber. Syringa has been known to grow well in areas where only scrub and cacti normally grow, particularly in Natal.

The experts contend its berries are poisonous. So are unripe apricots or green cucumbers, and nobody is trying to ban them!

Wouldn't it be better to allow the syringa to grow and to use its wood for braaiwood instead of indigenous thorn trees that are commonly favoured by braaiwood experts?

The pepper tree, another exotic species, will grow almost anywhere in South Africa - even in the Kimberley district, where natural thorn-tree vegetation is sparse and sheep are often seen sheltering under these trees.

What indigenous trees could be planted in the holiday areas of the Natal Drakensberg to provide the shelter, shade and beauty of the liquidambers, the planes, the cedars and the cypresses? The ouhout and salie trees would never form a proper shade, while yellowwood would take many years to do so.

Imagine the Transvaal Highveld without its gums. These trees survive extreme climatic conditions and without them the Highveld would be bleak and desolate.

In the north-western Cape and other areas the "invasive" prosopis tree provides the population with shelter, fuelwood, small laths and poles - needs that could in no way be filled by the indigenous thorn trees in the area.

Then there is the formal forestry industry, that, with its 1 200 000 hectares of pines, wattle, poplar and gum, provides in over 90 per cent of this country's timber needs. Take the wattle industry alone, which exports more than 600 000 tons to Japan annually. Imagine what it earns for South African in foreign currency.

Introduced trees (and plants) also provide in a large part of our agricultural wealth - pecan and macadamia nuts, apples, pears, peaches, grapes, plums and apricots, just to name a few.

Even the khaki bush and Mauritius thorn have their uses. In many abandoned denuded and overgrazed areas they are pioneer species, acting as a barrier to control soil erosion to a measure.

Latest on the "hit list" is the jacaranda, which is now being named an invasive species. Imagine Pretoria and Pietermaritzburg if all the jacarandas were destroyed.

In conclusion, aren't people invasive species here in Southern Africa too? We all introduced ourselves to this land. Are we not now exploiting more than we are conserving? Alas, I feel that at present this supposition is true.