ACACIA POLYACANTHA

Acacia polyacantha Willd. subsp. campylacantha (A. Rich.) Brenan
By Mike Bingham, line drawings by Trish Bingham

Names
General
Tonga group
Tonga
Ila
Soli
Sala
Toka
Eastern Province
Bisa
Nsenga
Northwestern Province
Kaonde
Lundamuzeeze,
Luvale
Lozi
mukoka, munga, muunga
muhwela, mufwefwe
muhwe, hitantasokwe
chombwe
mukwele
munfene
ngobe, ngowe
chombwe
kyambwe, kasale
muzenze, muña
muzenze
mukakani

Figure 1. Open stands of trees on the Kafue Flats.

Figure 2. White or cream flower spikes with the new leaves in November.

Figure 3. Pods on the leafless twigs in May-June.

The type specimen of Acacia polyacantha is from India. The subspecies campylacantha is widespread in tropical Africa, with the type specimen coming from Ethiopia. The species belongs to the subgenus Senegal alta, which has a pair of recurved prickles below each leaf.

Of all the Acacia species native to Zambia, A. polyacantha is the most common and widespread, but especially in the south of the country, above 15 deg. latitude. While most members of the genus are weedly to some degree, A. polyacantha is undoubtedly the weediest, able to colonize most vegetation types after disturbance, but requiring more fertile soils. Pure stands all of the same age (cohorts) are frequently found on recent deposits of alluvium. Impenetrable thickets of young trees can spring up in the space of a few years in heavily grazed areas. The Kafue Flats and the surrounding areas are its headquarters in Zambia, but some of the tallest specimens, up to 25m, are on alluvium over dolomite in Mpongwe District of south-western Copperbelt Province. They invade the margins of riverine forests after destruction by fire.

Extensive stands of the species may be classified as Munga Woodland, but it may be preferable to call it wooded grassland, as the grass is probably the more stable and permanent component.

Young trees especially can be mistaken for A. galpinii. Both trees can grow to a height of 25m, but A. polyacantha has a more erect habit, while A. galpinii has a wide spreading crown. Some of the more obvious differences are presented in Table 1.
Figure 4. The branching is erect, and the crown not wide spreading.
A number of Acacia species develop galls, and these can be useful aids to identification. Those of *A. polyacantha* are caused by a fungal infection of the young shoots, which results gross distortion, forming a type of “witches broom”.

A variety of caterpillars feed on the new foliage, including those of the small yellow butterfly *Eurema hecabe*.

The tree is fast growing and the light foliage does not suppress lawn grasses or ornamental shrubs. It can also serve as a nurse tree when reforesting grassland, creating conditions more favourable to the growth of forest species.