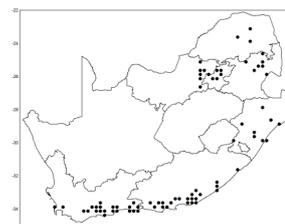
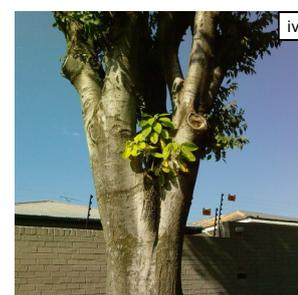


ARC-PPRI FACT SHEETS ON INVASIVE ALIEN PLANTS AND THEIR CONTROL IN SOUTH AFRICA

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BELHAMBRA (*Phytolacca dioica*) is a large semi-evergreen tree from South America that superficially resembles a fig (*Ficus* sp.), and which reaches as high as 20 metres. The trees often have multiple trunks, which are stout and robust (i), with a rounded canopy of up to 15 metres comprising enormous branches. Together, the trunk and branches contain approximately 80% water, and the genus comprises plants that produce a juicy dye. The root system is aggressive, and massive roots, which almost appear to buttress the tree, are visible above ground. Lush green leaves, approximately 70 mm long with pinkish stems and petioles (ii) occur alternately on the branchlets. Creamy-yellow flowers, which are borne in tassels (catkins) about 100 mm long (iii), appear from September to December, with male and female flowers occurring on separate trees. On female trees, flowering is followed by green, juicy, berry-like fruits that hang in clusters and blacken with age. These are eaten by birds and other animals, including livestock, that aid in seed dispersal. Belhambra is a category 1b declared invader in South Africa and must be controlled, or eradicated where possible.



THE PROBLEM

Although belhambra was originally brought in as an ornamental, in frost-free areas it has also been used to provide fodder and shade, and as a source of honey. However, some parts of the tree - the sap, the roots, and the green fruit, are poisonous. Since its introduction, belhambra has escaped cultivation and become invasive along the coast, as well as certain parts of the interior. Seed dispersal is aided by birds who feed on the ripe fruit, and there is evidence that many of these seeds germinate in the forks of indigenous and other trees (iv). In certain ecosystems, such as savannah and fynbos, belhambra trees have a high visual impact. In addition, they have the ability to outcompete and displace indigenous vegetation in virtually any frost-free habitat.

THE SOLUTION

Neither herbicides nor biological control agents are available for use against belhambra infestations in South Africa. Mechanical control is currently the only option and, although large established trees may be difficult to eradicate, younger plants are easier to control since they comprise mainly water, so the wood is very soft. In an effort to protect our natural environment, belhambra trees should be removed and, where required, replaced with indigenous species. Various indigenous, evergreen figs (*Ficus* species) are suited to frost-free areas, while the Cape ash (*Ekebergia capensis*) or the Natal plum (*Harpephyllum caffrum*) can be planted in areas that experience cooler weather. However, your local indigenous nursery will be able to provide you a number of alternatives to suit your particular environment.



environmental affairs

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Environmental Affairs
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

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