

Seven Browse Plants Enjoyed by Primates and Other Animals

Los Angeles Zoo and Botanical Gardens
GLAZA Docent Botany Committee

1 Fever Tree (*Acacia xanthophloea*)

This handsome tree, distinguished by its bright yellow-green bark, is native to southern Africa and found from tropical forests to the savannas. It prefers flooded or watery areas, also favored by disease-bearing insects and so, by association, it acquired the name “fever tree.” Its branches carry tiny green leaflets with paired white thorns at the leaf base. The blossoms are fragrant yellow balls, appearing from August to November. The tree is popular with wildlife: birds favor it for nesting because the spines deter snakes; giraffes eat the leaves and pods; vervet monkeys consume leaves, flowers and pods; elephants eat the young branches; and baboons feed on the gum and seeds. People use the wood as fencing to keep out hippos. You can find our fever trees in the planters in front of the Australia House.



Figure 1 Fever Tree

2 Fig Trees (Genus *Ficus*)

From earliest times animals, birds and humans have relished the sweet fruits of fig trees. *Ficus carica* was one of our first domesticated fruits and is still enjoyed today. Figs are an important part of the tropical rain forest ecology as they form a major part of the diet of a large variety of animals including primates. Many animals consume the foliage as well as the fruits and it's a popular browse plant among the Zoo's animals. We have seven species of fig trees in our Zoo gardens. One of them, *Ficus benjamina*, is widely known as a house plant. Sometimes known as the “weeping fig” because of its gracefully drooping branches, it has small glossy green leaves and tiny red berry-like fruits. *Ficus benjamina* is planted all around the Zoo. Look for it at the back of the chimpanzee exhibit and within the enclosure of the Sumatran rhino.



Figure 2 Fig Tree

3 Bird of Paradise (*Strelitzia reginae*)

This plant is one of the best known flowers in the world. First discovered by Europeans in South Africa where it grew wild in coastal bush and along river banks, it was widely admired for its spectacular and unusual bloom. It has a hard beak-like sheathe growing at a right angle to the stem and containing the flower within it. The flower consists of three bright orange sepals and three blue petals, two of which are fused into an arrow-shaped petal holding the nectary. The whole flower has the appearance of a crested crane-like bird arising from the surrounding large leathery blue-green leaves. The plant was named for the English Queen Charlotte Sophia of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, consort of King George III. The bird of paradise is the official flower of the city of Los Angeles. It blooms nearly year round and is growing throughout the Zoo, including the entrance of Aquatics and Treetops Terrace.



Figure 3 Bird of Paradise

4 Carob Tree (*Ceratonia siliqua*)

The carob tree is widespread over the Mediterranean Basin from southern Europe to North Africa and the Middle East. It grows well in Southern California with its similar climate and was introduced here by early Spanish missionaries. The tree was long valued for its large rich seed pods, used for both domestic animal fodder and human consumption. The pods are sweet and the flavor is similar enough to chocolate for it to be used as a satisfying substitute in the diet food industry. The seeds themselves are said to be the original weight measurement standard for gold and gemstones and the basis of the word “carat.” The tree is tall with dark green leaflets and it may have either white, pink or red small flowers in the spring. The dark brown leathery pods can grow as long as ten inches and are enjoyed by a wide variety of animals from fruit bats in the Middle East to coyotes here in California. We have several carob trees in our Zoo gardens including one in the Aquatics section, next to the overhead view and walkway.



Figure 4 Carob Tree

5 White Mulberry (*Morus alba*)

The white mulberry tree is widely known because its leaves provide food for the silkworm. The tree itself is handsome, growing up to 50 feet or so in height and with a thick trunk. The leaves, so vital to the silk industry, are large and coarsely toothed. Some leaves may have two or three conspicuous lobes while others on the tree will have none. The flowers are small, white and for the white mulberries that produce them, the fruits are a pale color. The blackberry-like fruits of other varieties are enjoyed by many people but they are staining to patio, sidewalks and clothing. As a result, the fruitless variety of the white mulberry is more popular for home gardeners and city parks. Many animals besides the silkworm enjoy the leaves and it's a favorite browse plant among the Zoo's animals. We have several fruitless white mulberries, including some at the hippo exhibit and on the right side of the Sumatran tiger enclosure.



Figure 5 White Mulberry

6 Cape Honeysuckle (*Tecomaria capensis*)

An attractive dark green shrub with bright red tubular-shaped flowers, the Cape honeysuckle is found all around the Zoo. It can grow rather tall and often spreads out forming a dense clump. Leaves are small and oval-shaped with blunt teeth around the edges. The flowers may vary from rich red to deep orange in color and often bloom throughout the year. They are pollinated by birds and the flower's tubular shape and bright reddish colors attract hummingbirds and butterflies. Cape honeysuckle is native to the South African Cape region, whose climate is similar to Southern California. Along with many other native South African plants, it grows easily here and so can be found in our home gardens as well. In traditional medicine of South Africa, the bark of the plant was dried and powdered, and then used to relieve pain and sleeplessness.



Figure 6 Cape Honeysuckle

7 African Coral Tree (*Erythrina caffra*)

The African coral tree has the thorny trunk, trifoliate leaves, one leaf having three leaflets, and seed pods with poisonous red seeds that are typically found in all coral trees of the world. The scarlet flowers of the African tree are broader, more open and accessible to nectar-eating song birds than are the tubular flowers of many of its South American relatives that are visited by hummingbirds. Children in Africa play games with, and make jewelry from the shiny red seeds. An example of the African coral tree can be found on the left going uphill path from the lion enclosure.



Figure 7 Coral Tree

Credits and Sources:

Kate Gaman, Chairman of the GLAZA Docent Botany Committee, wrote the text.

The photo of the Fever Tree, *Figure 1*, can be found at http://virginiahamilton.com/_southafrica/baboon.html.

The image of the gibbon foraging in a fig tree, *Figure 2*, can be found at <http://ecology.biotec.or.th/research.asp>.

The Bird of Paradise photo, *Figure 3*, can be found at <http://jardin-mundani.com/strelitziaceae/strelitzia.jpg>.

The photo of the Carob Tree, *Figure 4*, is from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and is found at <http://www.life.uiuc.edu/ib/363/image/ceratonia2.jpg>.

The photo of the White Mulberry, *Figure 5*, is by Chris Evans. It can be found at <http://www.forestryimages.org/browse/detail.cfm?imgnum=1380440>.

The photo of the Cape Honeysuckle, *Figure 6*, is from the Los Angeles Zoo and Botanical Gardens. It appeared on the cover of the summer 2003 issue of *Zoo View* and can be found at <http://www.lazoo.org/botancover/13.html>.

The photo of the African Coral Tree, *Figure 7*, can be found at http://nature.jardin.free.fr/image_gf/rg_erythrina_caffra_fl.jpg.

Typeset with `CONTEXT`. June 10, 2006.