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INTRODUCTION

East Africa, a region embracing Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, is one of the richest areas on the African continent in terms of its flora and fauna. This natural wealth is, to a very large extent, the product of the region's enormous diversity of habitat and climate. Broadly speaking, rainfall is both generous and reliable at the higher altitudes, the air is cool and the vegetation lush. By contrast the lowland areas tend to be hot and dry; the climate is both hot and humid along the coast and in the basins near the big lakes. Climatic and ecological variety create ideal environments for a great many different species of plants (and, of course, animals and birds).

This *Field Guide to Common Trees and Shrubs of East Africa* is not a botanical textbook, but a selective field guide to the more common trees and shrubs, indigenous, naturalized and exotic, that you will see in the region. It is designed to help the plant enthusiast identify prominent species that can be observed, studied and enjoyed in gardens and parks, along roadsides and in easily accessible parts of the countryside.

In East Africa, indeed throughout sub-Saharan Africa, trees fulfil important social and economic functions. In rural areas, the forests serve as the principal sources of energy, providing fuelwood and charcoal, and they go a long way toward meeting the needs of farmers and herders. They also yield materials for building and for many other domestic purposes.

Trees have profound significance in religious belief and ceremony, and their various components are central to traditional medicine. Indeed the forests are precious, fragile (and irreplaceable) repositories of ingredients basic to the treatment of a surprising number of human ailments. The wider world has only recently (belatedly) begun to appreciate their value, and their potential, in this respect. Indigenous trees and shrubs are part of East Africa's legacy. Not only are they natural resources and things of beauty to be admired, but also symbols of life. Today much of the forested land has been cleared for agriculture, and to fuel industry. There is an urgent need to cherish what remains, and to try to return at least some of the land to its original, pristine condition.