



Tropentag, September 14-16, 2010, Zurich

“World Food System —
A Contribution from Europe”

We Do Want to Plant a Baobab Tree: The Story of Malawi

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Abstract

Considering the baobab tree multiple uses, its nutritional and medicinal properties, and its economic value, it seems that this species should be widely cultivated. However, this is not the case: several factors stop local people from planting it. The situation in Malawi might be different than elsewhere due to the local economic importance of this tree: it is commonly used by commercial fruit processors and it is exported to Europe.

In order to determine if the baobab could be cultivated in Malawi, semi-structured interviews and group discussions were carried out in five villages along the southern Lake Shore. Moreover, two methods of seed pre-treatment and five methods of vegetative propagation were attempted with local farmers.

Few respondents had tried to plant a baobab tree, but only one obtained successful germination. All respondents were interested in planting baobabs and once told that fruiting period can be reduced through grafting, they were also keen on learning grafting techniques. Manual scarification was found to be better than soaking in water (seed pre-treatment). Grafting and budding success was high, while survival of stem cuttings was low. Although the success of the grafting carried out by a professional was higher than that of a farmer, farmer grafting success was high: about 85 %.

Results from this study indicate that if the economic importance of an under-utilised fruit tree is high, and the density of these trees low, despite traditional beliefs, local farmers are willing to plant it. And they can plant it, once taught, they have the skills to successfully pre-treat the seeds and graft the trees. Baobab economic importance could be used to motivate farmers to plant and better manage not only the baobab tree but also under-utilised fruit trees in general.

Keywords: *Adansonia digitata*, interviews, Malawi, propagation trials