

Gymnosporia glaucophylla – Blue Spikethorn

(=*Maytenus heterophylla* subsp *glauca*)

Member of the CELASTRACEAE (Spike-thorn) family

The Blue Spikethorn is spectacular when covered in scented white flowers from June to August, and it certainly grabbed the attention of all visitors to the garden on a June morning. With clusters massed along the length of each branch growing from the leaf axils, the tree is a sight to behold. The fragrance, however, is not as pleasant as one expects, given their beauty and colour. Against the dark, fissured bark, they glisten silver-white to breath-taking effect. Flowers have 5 free petals, and the somewhat fleshy flower disc secretes nectar.

Gymnosporia glaucophylla is a large variable shrub or small tree, growing up to 3 – 4 m high where it occurs in grassland and bushveld, often among rocks. The bark in mature specimens is deeply fissured, with a yellow-orange pigment visible inside the cracks. As is common in the genus, slender 35 mm spines make it an excellent barrier plant, also providing protection for birds and insects as they forage for food.

The tree is most attractive even without its winter flourish. The blue-green (glauco) foliage is stiff and leathery, and spoon-shaped with tips varying from pointed, to rounded or notched. September sees smooth, round red fruits forming in 2-valved capsules, with a white aril partially covering the seed, another feature typical of the family.

KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga

Gymnosporia is considered to be an Old World genus of plants.