

SEPTEMBER, NATIONAL ARBOR MONTH

The aim of National Arbor Month is to raise awareness and sensitise South Africans to the need to conserve, protect, and plant trees, for environmental and human-related benefits.

This year the theme is “Promoting Environmental Conservation and Sustainable Forest Management.” It aims to highlight key areas of forestry and tree planting in terms of their role in creating heritage wealth and sustaining healthy and resilient communities, through health benefits that are derived in forests including nutritious foods, medicine and rituals, fresh air, clean water and a place for recreation. One of the most important roles of forests is mitigation of climate change.

Arbor Day originated in Nebraska in America in 1872 and within two decades it was celebrated in every US State and territory. South Africa has been a relative late comer to the celebrations, with its first official Arbor Day in 1983 and by 1999, collective enthusiasm for the importance inspired the government to extend it to National Arbor Week and now Arbor Month. Arbor Month calls on South Africans to plant



indigenous trees as a practical and symbolic gesture of sustainable environmental management.

Every year two or three indigenous trees are selected as the tree of the year, the one a more common tree and the other a lesser known tree. This year's common tree is *Searsia lancea*, the karee and *Searsia leptodictya*, the mountain karee. Both are not common in the Garden Route area. The Karee is an evergreen tree up to twelve meters tall with a dark brown coarse bark on old stems. Not suitable for smaller gardens but an excellent shade tree in large gardens and parks.

The rare or uncommon tree is *Apodytes dimidiata* subsp. *dimidiata*, also known as the white pear/ witpeer. The White pear is one of the best-known forest trees in southern Africa as it is found from Table Mountain, along the coast through Kwa-Zulu Natal, Gauteng, Swaziland and Kenya. White pear comprises 3-9% of the total tree population of the Knysna Forest. Here it grows with yellowwood, stinkwood and assegaai.

The White pear is a small bushy tree 4 to 5 m tall but could reach a height of 20 m when growing in a forest. It has evergreen, glossy, bright green leaves that have a paler green, dull underside. The bark is pale grey and smooth. This tree is an

excellent plant to use in a landscape in areas where shade is required right through the year. It is suitable for a small garden and can be planted close to the swimming pool. The root system will not lift paving and foundations. The fruits are not fleshy and therefore cause no mess on paved areas. The White pear thrives in well-drained, compost-rich soil. Young plants are slow growing, but they will grow fairly fast as they get bigger.

National Arbor month is an opportune time to call on all to plant indigenous trees as a practical and symbolic gesture of sustainable environmental management. The choice we make today to plant a tree, to care for it and to manage existing trees will bring us to where we want to be in years to come.

Trees in urban spaces, which includes the home garden and pavement areas, plays a key role in the townscape by providing shade, aesthetic value, habitat for wildlife, and green corridors. However, trees are easily planted with no concept of how it will look or behave once matured they are haphazardly grouped together, where often the fast-growing ones smother the slower growers. Trees should be planted three to six meters apart to create the desired effect. Trees in urban spaces require several key principles to ensure they thrive and provide maximum benefit to the community. Some of the key principles are:

- Know your tree in terms of its growth rate, ultimate height, the final tree canopy, the shape of the tree, flowers, fruit/seed root structure and maintenance requirements.
 - Plant your trees where they can thrive without causing harm or being a nuisance.
 - Choose tree species that are suitable for the specific urban context, pavement garden or park.
 - For your specific functional and design objectives for the site, aim for the full range of benefits your trees can provide such as improving air quality, providing shade and windbreaks, enhancing biodiversity and aesthetic value.
 - Take care not to over plant.
 - Use a diverse mix of tree species and avoid invasive ones.
 - Choose trees that are pest-resistant and proven to be suitable for urban environmental conditions.
- Other design concepts of trees to consider are scale, light and shadow, colour, shape of the tree, function of the tree, balance, rhythm, focal points, spatial compositions etc. These principles help create urban spaces that are not only aesthetically pleasing but also environmentally sustainable, beneficial to the community and create a sense of place.