

Rooibos tea

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Background

Aspalathus linearis (rooibos) is a shrubby legume that is indigenous to the mountains of the Western Cape, South Africa. It grows upwards, up to 1,5 m in height and has a single basal stem that divides above the soil surface into multiple thin branches that carry bright green, needle-like leaves.

Origin and distribution

All species are native to South Africa and some have extended to KwaZulu-Natal areas. *Aspalathus* species grow in wild mountainous areas and its growth is limited by certain soil types.

Climatic and soil requirements

Rooibos adapt well in dryland with wet winter conditions. The plant needs a relatively low rainfall (250–400 mm) to grow well. The establishment of the plant requires deep sandy soil for easy enlargement of the roots. The plant prefers sandy soil with good drainage and pH of 4,5 to 5,5.

Uses

Rooibos leaves and stems are used for making tea. The tea is used for medicinal purposes to lower incidence of cancer. It is effective for infants' stomach cramps, skin irritation and nappy rash.

Cultural practices

Planting

Seeds are planted on seedbeds or raised from a nursery from February to March. In July to August seedlings could be transplanted to their respective plots.

Propagation

Rooibos tea may be propagated vegetatively from the cuttings. The plant may also be propagated by tray seeding.

Fertilisation

Generally, rooibos tea is produced organically. Therefore no chemical fertiliser application is required.

Irrigation

Rooibos producers do not irrigate but produce a desirable high-quality product.

Weed control

In rooibos production, horsegrass is a huge problem. The weed develops along rooibos plants, inhibiting plant development as they compete for water and soil nutrients. The weeds are removed by disc and shovel inside rows or manually by hand.

Pest and disease control

LEAFHOPPERS

It is a major pest in rooibos production, especially in summer. It causes damages on the leaf surface of rooibos tea, leading to discoloration and eventually inhibiting photosynthesis. Extreme infestation can cause plant losses. Leafhoppers are controlled by practising crop rotation.

CROWN-ROT AND ROOT-ROT DISEASE

These interrupt the development of the plant during the growth stage. A crop rotation system is applied, where wheat or potatoes could be planted after

rooibos. After harvest a bushcutter is used to flatten the bushes, then the land is burned to eliminate fungal diseases.