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sahel: eco info: vegetation



For nine months of the year, the Sahel is a vast expanse of brown. Greenery comes with the rainy season, but can be quickly consumed by animals in search of food or farmers in search of crop lands. Extensive cultivated fields of sorghum and millet are limited to the deltas of the Niger, Gambia and Senegal rivers.



Acacia (Acacia):



Acacia, whose deep root systems are ideal for semi-arid climates, are among the most common trees found in the Sahel. The tree's feathery leaves protect its bark from dry winds. If it doesn't rain, acacias may not produce leaves. The tree blooms in yellow or white fuzzy flowers. The bark of most acacias produces tannin, which is used in tanning leather; a variety of acacia native to the Sahelian Sudan, acacia senegal, produces gum arabic, used in pharmaceuticals and adhesives.

Baobab (Adansonia digitata) :



An African native, this drought-and fire-resistant tree is found throughout the Sahel. It is one of the largest trees on the planet, with trunks that are often 50 ft. wide, and heights of up to 85 ft. . In the dry season, the baobab is completely without leaves. Some local legends say that spirits planted the baobab tree upside down, thus accounting for its scraggly appearance in the dry season. The bark can be used for rope and cloth; the trunk, when hollowed out, as a shelter.

Jujube (Ziziphus mauritiana):



A small, spiny tree about 23 - 66 ft. tall, the jujube is drought-resistant and found throughout the Sahel. In Burkina Faso, this tree is often used to make living fences that provide farmers with food and for their animals, fodder. Its fruit can also be used to make strong distilled spirits.

Grewia bicolor:



A drought-resistant tree that favors rocky slopes and depressions, the grewia bicolor's fruit is eaten fresh or sun-dried and is often turned into a juice or alcohol. Its hard, durable wood is suited for construction and for crafting spoons, clubs, and bows and arrows. Its bark is used as a diuretic and laxative and to treat diarrhea, gonorrhea, syphilis and inflamed intestines.

Cram-cram (Cenchrus biflorus) :



This prickly, short-lived grass is the food of choice for the herds that graze throughout the Sahel. It is found throughout the region, primarily in regions that border the Sahara.

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Grewia Photo Credit/Copyright: Dr. Gerald D. Carr, University of Hawaii