Understanding harvesting, fire and honeybush ecology

WHY CONSERVATIVE HARVESTING CYCLES ARE RECOMMENDED

C. intermedia (Bergtee) shrubs can live for about 25 years and grow up to 2 m tall. Regular fires in fynbos burn all aboveground growth. But, because Bergtee is able to recover by regrowing many stems from the surviving underground rootstock, it is called a resprouter. Because of this resprouting ability Bergtee is suited to regular harvesting, (but not too often). For healthy resprouting the plant must have a few years to build up food stores in the rootstock, flower and set seed several times. If the leaves and stems of resprouters are harvested too often, the food stores get used up, regrowth and flowering is poor and the plant eventually dies.

When the shrubs eventually die from old age or disease they need to be replaced by new young plants which grow from seeds stored in the soil. So, even resprouters need to produce and deposit seeds in a reliable soil-stored seed bank.



Leaves are the "food Factories" of the plant. They must be plentiful and healthy to supply stores to the rootstock, and to give the plant energy to make buds, flowers and seeds.





YEAR OF HARVEST Plants need time to recover after harvest: 4 years between harvests allows rebuilding of rootstocks to support the plants' regrowth.



YEAR OF NATURAL FIRE

Natural fires every 10 – 40 years gives the
plants time to build up rootstocks so that they
resprout vigorously.

A hot fire causes the thick seed coat to crack
and then to germinate. Survival depends on
good rain after fire.







Ants carry the seed underground to feed on the tasty fleshy part leaving the seed undamaged. So seed is stored underground safe from predators.



After flowering, the green seedpods turn black, and the seed drops onto the ground. Resprouters only flower in the second and third year after a harvest or fire. After that almost no flowers and seeds are produced.

CITATION: McGregor, G.K. (2018). The Wild Honeybush Harvesting Field Guide. Department of Environmental Affairs and Development Planning, Western Cape Government, Cape Town.

