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# Native Plants of Togo

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## Introduction

Togo, nestled on the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa, is a nation remarkable for its rich biodiversity and dynamic landscapes compressed within a relatively compact territory. Despite its modest size, Togo harbors an astonishing variety of ecosystems—from sandy beaches and mangroves along its southern coastline to the rolling savannas, towering mountains, and lush forests that span its interior and northern stretches. These diverse environmental zones provide the backdrop for an equally impressive diversity of native plant life, forming the living tapestry of the nation's natural heritage.

The flora of Togo underpins the survival and prosperity of its people, weaving through every facet of society. Plants are not merely passive elements of the landscape; they are fundamental to local economies, traditional medicine, diet, culture, and the very identity of communities across Togo. The unique interplay of climate, soil, and topography across the country's five principal ecological zones has forged conditions ideal for the emergence of both widespread and highly localized—sometimes endemic—plant species.

Botanical exploration and documentation in Togo have a storied past, dating to the colonial era and evolving ever since. Early collectors laid the foundation for an ever-growing body of knowledge, expanded by contemporary Togolese and international researchers. Important institutions like the National Herbarium in Lomé have become repositories for thousands of plant specimens, capturing the diversity and complexity of the country's flora. Today, continued research—both in the field and through digitization efforts—is uncovering new species, refining our understanding of known plants, and informing conservation strategies.

Yet, Togo's native plant wealth faces significant and mounting threats. Ecosystem degradation, deforestation, agricultural expansion, the incursion of invasive species, and the overharvesting of resources endanger many species and the habitats where they thrive. Recognizing the urgency of these challenges, Togo has implemented strategies at both governmental and grassroots levels to protect its plant diversity—ranging from the establishment of protected areas to community-based forest management and national biodiversity action plans.

This book, "Native Plants of Togo: A Guide to the Native Plants of Togo," seeks to celebrate, document, and explain the country's rich floral heritage. It provides an exploration of Togo's major plant groups, ecological zones, emblematic species, and traditional knowledge systems, weaving in the crucial role of conservation and the prospects for sustainable use. By shining a light on Togo's botanical wealth, this guide

aspires to inform and inspire further stewardship, research, and appreciation—so that the vital resources and profound beauty embodied in the country’s native plants may endure for generations to come.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Geographic and Ecological Overview of Togo

Togo, a slender nation stretching like a terrestrial ribbon in West Africa, occupies a unique position on the map, nestled between Ghana to the west, Benin to the east, Burkina Faso to the north, and the gentle embrace of the Bight of Benin, part of the Gulf of Guinea, to the south. Its relatively small size, encompassing just over 56,000 square kilometers (a touch smaller than the state of West Virginia, for those who measure in such terms), belies a remarkable diversity of landscapes and, consequently, a fascinating array of ecological niches. This geographical compression means that within a relatively short north-south traverse of roughly 515 kilometers, one can experience a dramatic shift in terrain, climate, and the plant life they support.

The country's topography unfolds in a series of distinct bands as one moves inland from the coast. The southernmost edge is defined by a narrow coastal plain, a low-lying area characterized by sandy beaches that meet the Atlantic. This gives way quickly to a zone of tidal flats and shallow lagoons, the largest and perhaps most well-known of which is Lake Togo. It's a landscape where land and water engage in a constant, fluid conversation, shaped by the tides and the inflow of rivers.

Just beyond the immediate coastal strip lies the Ouatchi Plateau. This gently rising area extends inland for about 30 to 32 kilometers and sits at a modest elevation of 60 to 90 meters above sea level. This region is notable for its characteristic soil, often referred to as "terre de barre," a reddish, lateritic soil rich in iron. While not dramatically high, this plateau represents the first significant topographical shift from the coast and supports different plant communities adapted to its specific soil and slightly varied climate.

Continuing northward, the terrain gradually ascends to a tableland located northeast of the Ouatchi Plateau. This region reaches higher elevations, peaking at around 400 to 500 meters. This tableland is a crucial part of Togo's drainage system, primarily shaped by the flow of the Mono River and its various tributaries, including the Ogou River. The presence of these watercourses carves valleys and influences the local ecology, creating riparian habitats distinct from the surrounding landscape.

Dominating the central part of the country is the prominent Togo Mountains, also known as the Chaîne du Togo or the Togo-Atakora Mountains. This range runs diagonally across Togo, from the south-southwest to the north-northeast. It forms part of a larger chain that extends into neighboring Ghana (as the Akwapim Hills) and Benin (as the Atakora Mountains). These mountains introduce significant elevation

changes, creating cooler microclimates and varied slopes that contribute to the country's ecological diversity.

The highest point in Togo is found within this range: Mount Agou. This peak rises to an elevation of approximately 986 meters (about 3,235 feet), offering a commanding view of the surrounding landscape and serving as a significant geographical landmark. The mountainous terrain, with its varying altitudes and slopes, provides a complex environment where different plant species thrive depending on factors like exposure to sunlight, rainfall patterns shaped by the topography, and soil drainage.

North of the Togo Mountains, the landscape transitions once more to a sandstone plateau. This region is primarily a savanna area, characterized by more open vegetation. The Oti River, a major tributary of the Volta River, is the principal watercourse draining this northern plateau, its path shaping the local geography and influencing the plant life along its banks.

Finally, the far northwest of Togo presents a higher region distinct in its geological composition, characterized by granite and gneiss rock formations. The cliffs of Dapaong (Dapango) are a notable feature of this northwestern area. This geological difference contributes to unique soil types and drainage patterns, which in turn support specific plant communities adapted to these conditions.

Togo's climate is broadly tropical, but it exhibits variations from south to north, largely influenced by the movement of the Intertropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ) and the presence of the Harmattan wind. The southern part of the country experiences a Guinean tropical climate with two distinct rainy seasons. The first, longer rainy season typically occurs from mid-April through June, followed by a shorter, less intense rainy season from mid-September through October.

The coastal zone in the south is, perhaps surprisingly, the driest region, receiving around 890 millimeters (about 35 inches) of precipitation annually. This relatively lower rainfall near the coast, compared to areas slightly inland, influences the type of vegetation found there, favoring plants adapted to these conditions, such as mangroves and species found in coastal thickets and grasslands.

Moving inland, particularly around areas like Palimé in the Plateaux region, the rainfall increases significantly, reaching up to 1,800 millimeters (about 70 inches) annually. This higher precipitation in the southwestern highland regions contributes to the presence of tropical forests found there. The variation in rainfall across the south helps create a mosaic of vegetation types, from the drier coastal areas to the more humid inland plateaus.

In contrast to the south, the northern part of Togo experiences a tropical Sudanese climate with a single rainy season. This rainy season typically runs from June to the

end of September, with the majority of the annual precipitation, averaging around 1,150 millimeters (about 45 inches), falling during this period. The rest of the year in the north is dominated by the Harmattan, a warm, dry, dust-laden wind that blows from the Sahara Desert.

The Harmattan brings significantly drier conditions and can have a notable impact on plant life, requiring species in the north to be adapted to prolonged dry spells. This distinct dry season is a defining characteristic of the northern savanna landscape. The average annual rainfall in the north varies between 900 to 1000 mm.

Temperatures across Togo are generally warm, as is typical of a tropical climate. Mean annual temperatures range from the mid-20s Celsius (high 70s Fahrenheit) along the coast and in the mountains to the high 20s Celsius (high 80s Fahrenheit) on the northern plateau. Daily minimum temperatures can drop to the high 60s Fahrenheit (low 20s Celsius) in the mountains in August, while daily maxima in the north can soar into the low 100s Fahrenheit (high 30s Celsius) during March and April, towards the end of the long dry season.

The interplay of these geographical features—the coastal plain, plateaus, mountains, and river systems—and the varying climatic conditions across the country creates a mosaic of ecological zones. Each zone, with its specific combination of elevation, rainfall, temperature, and soil type, provides a unique habitat that supports a particular set of native plant species. These zones, ranging from coastal and mangrove areas to savannas, dry forests, and semi-evergreen forests, form the backdrop against which Togo's rich botanical diversity unfolds. The specific characteristics and the plant life within these zones will be explored in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

The soils of Togo are as varied as its landscapes, contributing significantly to the types of plants that can flourish in different areas. Along the coast, sandy soils dominate. Further inland, the "terre de barre" of the Ouatchi Plateau provides a lateritic soil. Fertile clay soils are found south of the Mono Tableland and in and around the mountain range, while the northern savannas tend to have poorer soils, including gravelly types in hilly areas. These soil variations, combined with the climatic factors, play a crucial role in determining the distribution and abundance of plant species across the country.

The major rivers, such as the Mono and the Oti, while not always navigable for large vessels, are vital for the ecosystems they traverse. They create riparian zones – areas along riverbanks that support lush vegetation due to more consistent access to water. These gallery forests and riparian plant communities are important habitats, often providing refuge for species not found in the drier surrounding areas.

The Togo Mountains act as a significant geographical barrier and a watershed,

influencing rainfall patterns and creating distinct ecological conditions on their windward and leeward slopes. This mountainous region is known for having particularly high plant diversity and even some degree of endemism for West Africa, meaning species found only in this specific area.

The transition from the southern, more humid climate to the northern, drier conditions is gradual, creating a transitional zone in the central part of the country. This central area exhibits characteristics of both Guinean and Sudanian climates and vegetation, resulting in a mix of savanna types and forest fragments.

Understanding this intricate relationship between Togo's geography, climate, and soils is fundamental to appreciating the diversity of its native flora. Each region presents a unique set of environmental conditions to which plants have adapted over millennia, resulting in the fascinating array of species that call Togo home. The following chapters will delve deeper into these ecological zones and the specific plant life that defines them, but the foundation for this diversity is firmly rooted in the physical landscape of the country.

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