

A blast from the very distant past



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Wollemi pines (*Wollemia nobilis*) date back about 90 million years. PHOTO BY MIKE DARCY

Gardeners are always seeking out the next new plant. The new introductions they find are often in high demand for the first few years on the market.

However, imagine for a moment an old plant — in fact a very old plant — that is in such high demand, it’s almost impossible to procure it. Consider the Wollemi pine, which dates back to about 90 million years ago.

Actually, it is not even a true pine, although it is both evergreen and a conifer.

Wollemi pines (*Wollemia nobilis*) were discovered in 1994 in a deep Australian rainforest gorge by New South Wales Services Officer David Noble, who came across them by chance. He was not familiar with these trees, so he collected

a fallen branch and took it to the Royal Botanic Garden in Sydney.

The sample intrigued scientists Wyn Jones and Jan Allan, and the trio set off to go back to the gorge. Once there, they were astounded by the find. The plant was named *Wollemia*, for the Wollemi National Park, where it was first discovered. The species was named *nobilis* to honor David Noble, the man who discovered it.

Today, there are approximately 100 mature trees remaining in the gorge and they are classified as critically endangered. To protect the remaining trees, the exact location is not publicized.

During a Hardy Plant Society of Oregon Open Garden event in Portland, I noticed this plant in the garden of Peter

Eastman and Dayrol Griffin. It had a prominent and visible spot in their garden. After learning about the history of its discovery, it was obviously strategically placed and deservedly so.

It was no surprise to see such a tree in this garden because Peter is an avid gardener and well connected in our local horticulture scene. As the tree and shrub buyer for the four-store Al’s Garden & Home chain, he also has his finger on the pulse of retail.

In 2006, the National Geographic Society was offering small Wollemi pine plants for sale by mail order. At that time, this was the only way to get one outside of Australia. Peter ordered one and it arrived in August of that year.

Peter didn’t know much about the Wollemi pine. He wasn’t sure if it would survive in our Pacific Northwest climate, so he kept it in a greenhouse for the first few years. In the summer it was taken outside and placed in the shade of other conifers.

When it eventually reached 15 feet tall, it needed a permanent home outside in the ground. It was planted in a shady area in the lee of a sheltering cedar. Peter has observed the tree setting male and female cones, but no seedlings have ever appeared.

Looking at the tree today, there is an area in the middle of the tree that looks »

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brown and burnt, which was the result of a winter storm January 13 and 14, 2024. According to the National Weather Service in Oregon, these were the coldest days of the year, with high temperatures of 21 and 23 F.

The damage to the Wollemi pine was not critical, but some branches certainly did experience some winter kill. Since that winter freeze, the tree has sent out lush new growth at the top and new trunks from the main trunk. Eventually it should become a multi-trunk tree, which is common of this tree in the wild.

“What I love about this conifer and how you can tell it is so ancient, is it lacks the ability to send out side branches,” Peter said. “Each branch sends out one growth spurt from the terminal bud and that is it. You can literally count the number of years growth on each branch by counting the growth sections.

“This is what gives the Wollemi Pine its distinctive skinny appearance. Most conifers evolved the ability to send out side branches, giving them wider branches which provided the foliage more light and thus, more photosynthesis. But that evolution came after this plant.”

This past autumn season, and as part of the HPSO ‘After Hours’ series, Al’s Garden & Home hosted an evening event with conifers as the theme. Peter was able to secure five Wollemi pines from Iseli Nursery (Boring, Oregon). These were available at the event for \$500 each and they were all sold before the event began!

One of the fortunate recipients was Portland gardener Gene Rozenboom, who is an avid conifer collector. I recently visited his garden, and his Wollemi pine is in a very prominent place. At the recent American Conifer National Conference held in Portland, Iseli’s donation of a

Wollemi pine sold for \$3,600!

The Wollemi pine is certainly sufficiently old enough to be classified as a Jurassic plant. The term Jurassic plants is sometimes used as a reference to those plants that were in existence from an age when dinosaurs roamed the earth. In addition to the Wollemi pine, there are many others that are often used in the gardens of today.

There seems to be a renewed interest in conifers. Perhaps this can be beneficial to a garden center. Just imagine garden centers offering classes about Jurassic plants where they have the attendees pretend they are paleontologists sent out to scour the garden center to see how any Jurassic plants they can find. Of course, there would need to be helpful hints and tips along the way, but what fun! ☺

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