

A tree for all seasons, and ages



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The species survived 17 ice ages and the splitting of subcontinents. Dinosaurs trod the Earth in its shade, and for 2 million years, only fossils testified to its existence. So it is exciting to know that it raises its evergreen arms along a ledge in the Australian bush.

It's even more exciting to know that descendants of a tree known as a living fossil can carry on the line in your own living room. Also, that a portion of every sale goes to the preservation of a lost-and-found species. And to add a local angle, that the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and a Long Island nursery are playing parts in its resurrection.

So come along with me on the trail of the Wollemi pine.

It begins in August 1994, when an Australian park ranger named David Noble rappelled into an 1,800-foot gorge in the wilds of Wollemi National Park in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales and found a grove of conifers unlike any he'd ever seen. Some towered more than 100 feet. They had pendulous foliage and bark that resembled bubbling chocolate. "It's as if you had a tree trunk and just sprayed it with Coco Pops," Noble said at the time.

If it were a breakfast cereal, the discovery would have eclipsed Corn Flakes, Cheerios, Wheaties and instant oatmeal all wrapped into one. "The significance of the discovery can't be exaggerated," says Gerry Moore, chairman of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden's science department. "It's not like the passenger pigeon or the dodo bird. Living specimens had never been seen. And suddenly, one day a guy finds them."

In honor of its discoverer and the park, the "pinosaur" was named *Wollemia nobilis*. A member of the *Araucariaceae* family, it's a relative of the Norfolk Island pine and the monkey puzzle tree. It's bisexual, with male cones near the bottom of the tree and female cones at the top. When it sheds, *Wollemia nobilis* drops whole branches instead of leaves. Multiple trunks grow from its root system. This enables the tree to lay low and send up new trunks when fires have burned out and ice ages have come and gone.

Today, nearly 100 mature trees live in the gorge that is their only known natural habitat. In a sense of time and size, it's a valley of the giants — the oldest pine, nicknamed King Billy, rises 131 feet with a trunk



PHOTO BY JAIME PLAZA

A "conifer like no other," the Wollemi pine has a friend in a Long Island nurseryman.

about 5 feet across and is thought to be 1,000 years old.

In the aboriginal language, *Wollemi* means "look around you, keep your eyes open and watch out." A good caution — especially in the vast wilderness about 120 miles west of Sydney. It would literally be the height of folly to go looking for the evergreens that branch into the past — the gorge is surrounded by mountains, and you'd probably need a helicopter. Besides, the Australian government is keeping the location secret — a wise decision, considering the human capacity for destroying wild species. Instead, the Aussies decided on a program of conservation by commercialization — to propagate and sell the trees.

You can buy a seedling of at least 10 inches through National Geographic's Web site or the Brooklyn Botanic Garden's Web site — a potted tree is on exhibit in the Trail of Evolution greenhouse, and some seedlings are on sale at the garden. "Last fall, we started selling it online," says Michelle Corbin, who does public relations for National Geographic. "We didn't expect to sell so many, so now we're doing a more limited retail launch." She added a personal note: "The tree does very well indoors. You can trim them back. I have a couple in my office."

Which brings me to another trail marker — an energetic self-taught horticulturist named Josh Schneider. "I started out as a poli-sci major," he says, "but I figured plant people would be nicer than the people in politics,

and I've never been disappointed."

So, after starting a garden center in his native Illinois, he got a job developing and marketing plants for Proven Winners, which tests new introductions throughout the world. He was visiting breeders in Australia when friends turned him on to the Wollemi pine.

Last March, Josh was granted a license by the Australian government to market the lonesome pines. He quit his job, and he and a friend formed their own company — Wollemi Pine North America. To some extent, he says, it was an act of love. "The initial investment was substantial — let's just say the kids' college and my retirement are riding on this. But I was smitten with this tree."



PHOTO BY ANNA KALINOWSKA

Botanists have been busy propagating the 'pinosaur.'

Josh's company is authorized to sell the tree under the National Geographic name. "We wanted to make sure the tree wouldn't be politicized. If ever there was a perfect plant for National Geographic, it's the Wollemi pine."

Which takes us from Australia to Long Island — to Beds & Borders, the wholesale nursery in Laurel that was the life's work of the late Kathy Pufahl. Kathy was my mentor and my friend, and every spring and summer, her flowers live in my garden. Josh was a friend of Kathy and her husband, Kevin Cande, who has expanded the business with a greenhouse operation on the west coast of Florida.

To Josh, it seemed a perfect place to grow the seedlings — propagated in Australia from young plants grown from seeds and cuttings originally taken from the trees in the wild. "I was looking for a grower I could trust who has a facility in a warm climate. These trees shouldn't be treated like petunias."

Kevin treats them carefully. As the only Wollemi grower in the United States, he got about 20,000 plants last fall and has already shipped more than 7,000 to customers who order through National Geographic. "It's a very unusual, aesthetically pleasing tree," he told me. "It's a project I'm proud to be involved in."

I don't think his pride is misplaced. I suspect I'll order a seedling. It's nice to think about the lonesome pines in the secret canyon. And about a dinosaur in my living room.

Pine stats

Here's a snapshot of *Wollemi nobilis* — the pine from the past:

Vital stats: Grows up to 3 feet a year and can reach 65 feet during its lifetime; the tallest *Wollemi* in the wild measures 131 feet but has been growing for nearly 1,000 years. Don't be frightened — if you hold back on light and fertilizer, it grows more slowly. Besides, the lonesome pine doesn't mind being cut back, which makes it a good houseplant.

Fine features: Deep green, fernlike foliage and bark that looks like bubbling chocolate. Multiple trunks grow from the roots.

Relatives: A member of the *Araucariaceae* family, which includes the Norfolk Island pine and monkey puzzle tree.

TLC: Best grown as a houseplant in our climate, although trials suggest it's hardy to USDA Zone 11. Plant in well-drained slightly acid soil. Place by a well-lit window or door, but put it outside in a sheltered, shaded spot for one week every month when temperatures are above freezing. Water when dry — saturate every week or two but don't let it sit in water. Feed with slow-release phosphorus fertilizer.

FYI: Purchase Wollemi pines at www.nationalgeographic.com for \$99.95 or www.bbg.org for \$129. For more information about conservation, visit www.wollemi-pine.com.

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