

Wollemia nobilis – an update

JONATHON JONES, Garden Director at Tregothnan in Cornwall, describes the first flowering of this species in England.

Wollemia nobilis first hit the headlines in 1994 when David Noble found the grove of them northwest of Sydney, the exact location still secret. Tregothnan had been busy adding to its collection of rarities for and immediately set about adding this Araucariaceae family star as soon as possible. During the late nineties an exciting rush of new material came to Tregothnan from the International Conifer Conservation Programme and it was hoped that this highly respected route would transcend the bureaucracy and allow in the first 'Pinosaur', as it was now called. This was not to be. The Australians mounted the finest example of commercial conservation the world had yet seen. The setting up of the Wollemi Pine conservation club and the Wollemi Pine website communicated the benefits of sensitive commercial propagation of the trees and a coordinated release across the world. Tregothnan was conducting a tea tasting at the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew in October 2005 with its own botanical first, tea actually grown in the UK. This had attracted huge international interest with crews from USA and Japan keen to see The Honourable Evelyn Boscawen about his tea and other plants his family had pioneered at Tregothnan since 1335. But what really caught Mr Boscawen's eye were the posters advertising the forthcoming auction of the *Wollemia*.

When the auction got underway in Sydney Mr Boscawen was a registered telephone bidder and succeeded in purchasing an early lot, a 1.5m tree of great promise, shortly after 6am. Tregothnan knew from long experience that having the plant alive-o in home soil is the 'first' that really matters. As soon as the tree landed at Heathrow and cleared the formalities it was whisked by the waiting driver straight to its prepared corner of the Southern Hemisphere collection. A fine mesh cage completely enclosed the tree to protect against possible vermin and birds acquiring a taste for this delicacy straight out of Australian late winter to Cornish early winter. A close eye was kept on the tree, as it seemed to hold its unlikely new growth through to the spring. It then made reassuring growth of about a foot in height during its first year. The tree now stands over 2m.

Tregothnan is often the first home of rarities that would be at risk in a public space. However, visitors may visit by appointment at most time of the year and Mr and Mrs Boscawen usually open the Garden for a weekend in spring to raise funds for a charity. The wollemia instantly captured attention of visitors and the media in Cornwall and nationally during the spring of 2006 with some visitors travelling for five hours to see the tree. The tree seemed to respond with a fine display of male cones, each yielding at least a teaspoonful of ultra fine yet heavy pollen, mustard yellow in colour. Tregothnan supports and admires the statutory protection given to wollemia, preventing the exploitation of the tree



The pom-pom-like female flowers of *Wollemia nobilis* first appeared above the male cones in the UK on a plant at Tregothnan in April 2008.

without helping to conserve its habitat and management. So what happened next, in April 2008, really caused a stir. Female cones appeared above the male cones in a neat-tiered formation. At first the female cones passed as oversize growing tips like a leading bud. Images of female cones seemed hard to find in any online reference and our contact with botanical institutes in the UK and overseas drew a blank. The cones were pom-pom like and swelling to malteser size. The formation became so striking that images were sent to Australia for confirmation that these were in fact female cones, probably the first to occur outside Australia.

Questions were soon raised about the breeding prospects for the 'living dinosaur' and more excited suggestions to cross breed with other conifers. Male cones appear to ripen in early April, perhaps a month before female cones are ready. Tregothnan had been experimenting with storing male pollen at 2°C and hope this will overcome any mismatch in maturity timing.

Meanwhile a grove is being established, perhaps on a scale to match the dozens of monkey-puzzles in the deer park. Who can guess what kind of business these members of the Araucariaceae may get up to in future?

Christmas trees have long been part of the wood yard activities at Tregothnan in December, being unique in mid and west Cornwall for families who wish to cut or even dig their own. It seemed the perfect moment to add



A mesh cage encloses the rare *Wollemia nobilis* to protect it from vermin, birds and other possible "predators". This tree which is one of the first introductions from the original sale, in 2005 is now over 2m high.

49

wollemia to the menu as the price of usual species has rocketed. *The Western Morning News* carried the story and the next day it was in the national papers and TV. We were selling a wollemia every 20 minutes to a corner of the UK – this tree truly proving its phenomenal popularity. All the plants sold came *via* the authorised channel direct from Australia then through the wholesale nursery Kernock for us to retail. Our cuttings cannot be sold but we are propagating for the garden. They are quite slow and prone to dorsiventrality, continuing to grow laterally if that's how they were on the parent. All customers were planning to keep the tree potted or plant out in the spring. We hope to track the performance of 150 of these trees in coming years.

The future of the tree at Tregothnan is assured, there are serious plans to extend the plantings into groves and even plantations, as well doing fun things with the tree; creating walking sticks and even furniture. A walking stick is to be sold under the title 'walking with dinosaurs'.

Tregothnan website has a section for wollemia and it features heavily in the blog, www.tregothnan.com. The gift of a tree from Tregothnan to Africa, *via* Kirstenbosh, is a story to unfold online in coming months.

RHS Chelsea 2009 will see the first male and female cones on display, on the Tregothnan stand on Main Avenue.