

VanDusen Botanical Garden TREE OF THE MONTH: *Araucaria araucana*
5251 Oak Street November 2010
Vancouver, BC BV6M 4H1

To locate this tree, please refer to the map on the other side of this sheet. Look for a black sign near the tree labeled 'Tree of the Month'.

When they see the monkey puzzle tree, *Araucaria araucana*, visitors to the Garden often comment that it looks like a child's drawing of a tree. However, this conifer has a pedigree back to the time of the dinosaurs. Its leathery foliage may have evolved as a deterrent to herbivorous dinosaurs that in turn may have evolved bigger digestive systems in order to eat the leaves.

One hundred fifty million years ago, these trees flourished over much of the earth, but successive ice ages reduced their current populations to southern Argentina and Chile where they can still be found in the wild. Because their straight trunks produce perfect planks, they have been over-exploited and are now a protected species.

The botanical name, *Araucaria araucana*, is taken from the native group living where the tree was first spotted by Archibald Menzies, the naturalist who accompanied Captain George Vancouver on his great voyage. Menzies was served the seeds of the tree at a dinner and put some of the almond-sized pods in his pocket. On the voyage back to England, the seeds sprouted, and the tree later became all the rage in Victorian England. Older areas of Vancouver settled by English immigrants are populated with very large monkey puzzle trees, but they are out of fashion in contemporary small gardens.

Since Roman times, petrified monkey puzzle tree fossils found along the Yorkshire coast of England have been made into highly polished black ornaments and jewelry to ward off evil spirits. Queen Victoria popularized this stone, called jet, during her mourning for Prince Albert.

Legend has it that the monkey puzzle was given its common name when a Victorian gardener told visitors admiring his specimen that "it would puzzle a monkey to climb it," a reference to the very prickly thick leaves. The French call the tree 'le désespoir des singes', or 'monkey's despair.' Some visitors note that the branches look like a monkey's tail. However, there are no monkeys in its native habitat!

Whatever the name, the monkey puzzle is a striking tree that has survived much longer than we will and deserves its designation as a 'living fossil.'

There are several monkey puzzle trees in the Garden. Some are located appropriately in the Southern Hemisphere Garden. Look for the 'Tree of the Month' sign. More can be found near the maze at the western edge of the Garden. Others are growing in various spots in the Sino-Himalayan Garden.