

Tree of the Month, March 2013: Coigüe or Dombey's southern beech (*Nothofagus dombeyi*)

We have a beautiful *Nothofagus dombeyi* in the Southern Hemisphere Garden here at VanDusen. The tree has a wide, spreading crown of elegant branches covered in tiny, glossy evergreen leaves. The secret to its vigour lies in its location; it was planted on a stream bank, exactly the kind of setting where the healthiest Coigüe, a water-hungry species, are found in Chile and Argentina. Coigüe is the common name for *Nothofagus dombeyi* in the language of the Mapuche, the indigenous inhabitants of that part of South America. Coigüe is an important tree in its native range, forming dense forests, occasionally mixed with monkey puzzle trees (*Araucaria araucana*), known locally as pehuén.

Nothofagus dombeyi was named for French botanist Joseph Dombey, who was sent to South America in the 1770s to study the local flora and find plants that could be grown in France. Although he suffered many difficulties, including having his collections seized by both the British and Spanish, he did some important work on the cinchona tree, which is an important source of quinine, a treatment for malaria. He was eventually captured by privateers and imprisoned in Montserrat, where he died in 1794. Much of his work was published by his fellow botanists José Pavon and Hipólito Ruiz in their *Flora Peruviana, et Chilensis*. His plant collections are currently held at the British Museum, the Real Jardín Botánico de Madrid, and the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris.

With the notable exception of Africa, the genus *Nothofagus* is, or was, found on all continents in the Southern Hemisphere. Fossils of *Nothofagus* dating back to the Cretaceous period have been found in Antarctica, suggesting that the current distribution of this genus dates back over 200 million years to the time when South America, Australia, New Zealand and Antarctica were merged into a supercontinent known as Gondwana. The Antarctic beech, *Nothofagus antarctica*, is found as far south as Isla Hoste in Tierra del Fuego, closer to the south pole than any other tree known to science. We have several *N. antarctica* growing in our Southern Hemisphere Garden, but they tend to form weak root systems in our clay-rich soil and often blow over in wind storms.