

Tree of the Month, October 2013: Coffin tree (*Taiwania cryptomerioides*)

With a common name like “coffin tree”, it was inevitable that *Taiwania cryptomerioides* would be chosen for the month leading up to Halloween. Native to Taiwan, China, Vietnam, and Myanmar, this tree produces fragrant, durable wood with a beautiful pale yellow and dark red grain. In China and Taiwan, this wood has long been prized for building fine coffins, so much so that the tree is now becoming scarce and logging of the species is prohibited in much of its range. On the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, coffin tree is considered globally Vulnerable. In Vietnam, a tiny population of 100 individuals, which was discovered by Vietnamese botanists in 2001, is considered to be Critically Endangered. Some Vietnamese locals who live near these rare trees try to protect them, and there are reports of people dressing them in warm clothes in winter.

Taiwania is related to the giant redwoods and sequoias of California, and is sometimes called “Taiwan redwood”. *Taiwania* is one of the most massive trees in Asia, reaching up to 85 meters in height, 4 meters in trunk width, and can live for 2000 years. The biggest trees are found in moist forests, and they grow quite well in the Pacific Northwest.

Taiwania cryptomerioides was first scientifically described and named by a Japanese botanist named Bunzo Hayata in 1906, when Taiwan was under Japanese rule. Hayata, who made the flora of Taiwan the focus of his research from 1900 to 1921, is known as the father of Taiwanese botany and is credited with naming roughly 1600 Taiwanese plant species, subspecies, and varieties. The first specimen of *Taiwania cryptomerioides* came from Yushan National Park, where much of Taiwan’s protected populations of coffin trees are found today.

As a young tree, the blue-gray needles of *Taiwania cryptomerioides* are long and pointed, resembling those of the Japanese cedar, *Cryptomeria japonica*. This is where the specific epithet *cryptomerioides* comes from - it literally means “resembling *Cryptomeria*”. Upon reaching sexual maturity, which often occurs when the tree is about 15 meters tall, the needles become shorter and lie flat against the branchlets. The trees at VanDusen are still in their juvenile stage.

While rare in the wild, coffin trees are fairly common in horticulture. They were introduced to western gardeners in 1918 by Ernest Wilson, a plant explorer who travelled around Asia collecting plants for British nurseries. One of the coffin trees at VanDusen was purchased from a Canadian nursery, and the other was grown from seed that was collected near Xueshan, the second highest mountain in Taiwan, in Shei-Pa National Park in 1990. They can both be found in the Sino-Himalayan Garden.