

# Monkey puzzle tree

## *Araucaria araucana*



Monkey puzzle trees (*Araucaria araucana*), even when small, make a bold and somewhat weird statement in the landscape. With broad, spreading, rope-like branches, they look like few other plants. Related to the Norfolk Island pine (*A. heterophylla*) and the lesser-known bunya-bunya (*A. bidwillii*), from Queensland, monkey puzzles are native to lower elevations in the Andes of Chile and Argentina. All are members of the family Araucariaceae. The araucariads of the Southern Hemisphere are members of an ancient lineage of conifers. Wayne Armstrong discussed the family

and its role in West Coast gardens in the January 2010 issue of *Pacific Horticulture*. He noted that the 1994 discovery of the Wollemi pine (*Wollemia nobilis*), not far from Sydney, Australia, brought renewed attention to this family of fascinating conifers.

English naturalist Archibald Menzies brought the first monkey puzzle tree to Europe in the 1790s. While attributed to Menzies, the actual origin of the name “monkey puzzle” is not entirely clear, particularly since monkeys are not native to the natural range of *Araucaria araucana*. It is thought that the prickly, outwardly directed leaves would create a challenge for monkeys or any other climbing animals interested in accessing the cones and seeds of this tree. The trees are dioecious, with male, pollen-producing cones and female seed cones borne on separate individuals. The large seeds have historically been an important food source for the indigenous people of the Mapuche culture, where the tree is known as pehuén or piñon araucaria. The remaining groves of monkey puzzle trees are now protected, and the harvest of seeds is limited by law. Indeed, monkey puzzle is considered endangered and is protected by CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

**Medicinal use of Monkey Puzzle Tree: A resin obtained from incisions in the trunk is used in the treatment of ulcers and wounds.**



**Habitat of the herb: Mountain slopes in deep sandy soils in coniferous woodland, usually with *Nothofagus* spp.**

**Edible parts of Monkey Puzzle Tree: Seed - raw or cooked. Rich in starch. The seed is soft like a cashew nut and has a slight flavour of pine nuts. This is a delicious seed and it makes very pleasant eating. It is a food that can easily be eaten in quantity and can be used as a staple food in the diet. Fairly large, the seeds are about the size of an almond and can be 3cm long x 1cm wide. They are harvested in the autumn and, when kept in cool, dry conditions will store for at least 9 months.**



**Other uses of the herb: Very tolerant of maritime exposure, trees can be grown as part of a shelterbelt, though they are very slow growing and have an open canopy and so do not give a lot of shelter. A resin is obtained from incisions in the trunk. This is used mainly for medicinal purposes. Wood - pale yellowish, good quality, takes a beautiful polish. Used for joinery and carpentry.**

**Propagation of Monkey Puzzle Tree: Seed - best sown as soon as it is ripe in a cold frame or it can be stored cool and moist then sown February in a greenhouse. Although the plants are quite cold-tolerant, the root systems of seedling plants can be damaged**

in spells of very cold weather so give some extra protection at this time if necessary. The seed usually germinates in 1 - 2 months at 15C. As soon as they are large enough to handle, prick the seedlings out into individual pots. The plants have a rather sparse root system and are best placed in their final positions as soon as possible. Give them some protection for their first winter. Cuttings of half-ripe wood, May to July in a cold frame. Only epicormic side-shoots should be used, normal side-shoots do not develop properly. An epicormic shoot is one that develops from a dormant bud on the main trunk of the tree.

