

Rare Trees for Sale

TO PRESERVE A THREATENED, ANCIENT SPECIES, BOTANISTS ARE MARKETING ITS OFFSPRING

BY
JEREMY
CAPLAN

TO SAVE AN ENDANGERED TREE, PUT IT UP FOR SALE. And whatever you do, don't tell anyone where it is. That's how an Australian consortium is protecting the Wollemi pine tree, a rare species that

dates back to the era of dinosaurs. Fewer than 100 full-grown trees remain, and by selling plants grown from their cuttings, Wollemi Pine International hopes to raise funds for preservation and stop the poachers who could destroy the species forever.

The excitement over the Wollemi started in 1994 when a hiker named David Noble stumbled upon the previously unknown tree while exploring Wollemi National Park, a wilderness area that covers more than a million acres outside Sydney. Experts at Sydney's Royal Botanic Gardens pronounced the finding a new genus and decided to keep the trees' location secret, since poachers would value its scarcity and thus commercial value.

After figuring out how to grow healthy, versatile plants from small cuttings, preservationists started marketing baby trees to reduce the potential for black-market sales. The consortium has already sold 50,000 in Australia. Starting Nov. 15, the plants will ship to gardeners in the U.S. through the National Geographic Society for \$99 apiece.

Jimmy Turner, director of horticultural research for the Dallas Arboretum, says de-

mand for rare plants like the Wollemi has grown sharply in recent years. "The buying public is looking for brighter, bigger and better plants," he says. Sales of simple seeds and bulbs have correspondingly slowed, he adds, because plant fans want ever more exotic species that are already partly grown. "Gardeners are more interested in decorating their yard than the old-fashioned process of planting seeds and watching them grow slowly."

Turner is testing 3,000 new varieties of bedding plants this year to help plant lovers identify the best of what's new, and he considers the Wollemi among the most unusual. Unlike other pine trees, which have a single trunk, the Wollemi pines,

Fewer than 100 Wollemis, above, remain, but selling cuttings may prevent their extinction

once fully grown, can have up to 100 trunks and stand more than 80 ft. tall. Hardiness has allowed the species to survive for millions of years, all the way back to when *T. rex* roamed the earth. "Its discovery is the equivalent of finding a dinosaur alive today," says Sally McGeoch, marketing manager for Wollemi Pine International.

McGeoch says the consortium, made up of an Australian nursery, Sydney's Botanic Gardens Trust and the Queensland, Australia, Forestry Department, wants the Wollemi to avoid

the fate of Australia's foxtail palm, which was decimated in the wild after its location became known and poachers took seeds and plants to market without regard for research or preservation.

Most rare plants—like species recently discovered growing out of cracks in the sides of mountains in Hawaii—tend to thrive only in very specific environments. The Wollemi, on the other hand, can grow in climates as cold as 23°F and all the way up to 113°F.

Last year the Wollemi consortium approached the National Geographic Society for help in publicizing and distributing the plants. In the first two weeks after the society advertised the plants online, it took more than 1,000

orders. The current marketing effort targets the more than 83% of American households that do some gardening and contribute to a \$35 billion industry that sells thousands of species a year. Although there's only one Wollemi, its babies may soon be growing all over the world.



The Wollemi plant, above, is being distributed by National Geographic



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