



Jurassic backyard

Gardeners can own a piece of history.
By Jennifer Stackhouse.

The Wollemi pine story has all the elements of a blockbuster movie. It casts the plant's discoverer, David Noble, a National Parks and Wildlife Service employee, in the role of Indiana Jones. The tree itself, if not a Holy Grail, is an amazing relic of a time 150 million years ago when dinosaurs roamed the earth.

If your heart has been captured by the Wollemi story, here's your chance to buy a tree in time for Christmas. The prices of the new-release pines start at \$55, far more affordable than you would

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expect from the huge sums gained in October at auction, where the average price paid for the first-generation advanced trees was \$2000. (The auction raised more than \$1 million, with the highest price of \$149,000 for a lot of 12.)

There is a hitch, though: the new plants won't be arriving until April 1. What you will get to stuff that stocking this Christmas is a Certificate of Authenticity or Gift Certificate, a care booklet and an IOU for one plant delivered to your door.

According to Barbara McGeoch, general manager of Wollemi Pine International, the company marketing the pine, April 2006 was always the date for the national and international release. "As the



AUCTION STATIONS

The first generation of Wollemi pines, auctioned on October 23 by Sotheby's, were all at least two metres tall and could trace their origin back to individual wild trees. About 10 per cent of the 292 trees headed overseas.

In Australia, some of the trees have already found their way to public display. One has been planted at Ganowindra Public School in the Central West of NSW, whose students won the tree by entering a poetry competition. Another tree, bought by Tim Pickles, of Tim's Garden Centre at Campbelltown, is on display at the nursery and will be won by a customer.

Also bidding was the Roche family, whose purchase will be planted at the Hunter Valley Gardens at Pokolbin. Trees have been bought for commemorative planting by the Australian National University, the University of New England and the Sydney Adventist Hospital at Wahroonga. Trees were also donated to the Orange Botanic Gardens in NSW and the Mackay Botanic Gardens in Queensland.



Dinosaur fodder ... a Wollemi seedling, right; Lot 1, which sold at the plant's first auction in October, opposite page.

PHOTOS: MARK GREYBARS, Jason Loucas

Illustration: Kerrie Leleshman

trees are all cutting grown, it takes time to grow enough mother stock plants to provide the huge number of cuttings we need and to grow those cuttings to saleable size," she says. "As well, autumn is a good time to transport and plant this valuable tree in Australia and coincides with the northern hemisphere spring, which is the best time for planting in the UK and Europe."

The trees are about 400mm tall in 150mm pots and about 600mm tall in 200mm pots. The plants are growing in biodegradable pots with biologically friendly labels. A percentage of the sale of each plant goes to plant conservation.

PLANTING

Overview Fast-growing tree (expect about one metre a year), free of pests and diseases.
Aspect and frost tolerance Grow in sun or part shade. Can withstand temperatures at least down to minus five degrees with trial trees surviving to minus 12 degrees.
Soil, watering, fertiliser A well-drained position (don't allow potted specimens to stand in a saucer of water) and water only when the soil or potting

mix begins to dry out. Plants respond well to fertiliser but use a slow release or liquid low-phosphorus fertiliser.

In the garden A Wollemi pine needs a lot of space. Its tendency to form several trunks means it can be used as a screening plant or even multi-planted as a hedge spaced one to two metres apart. The pines can be pruned in winter to maintain a compact shape. As a feature tree, it will eventually reach more than 20 metres. Team it with cycads and ferns for an authentic dinosaur effect.

In a pot For smaller spaces, the Wollemi pine can be grown in a pot indoors or outside (ideal for a patio, balcony or courtyard). As an indoor plant it needs a very brightly lit spot and frequent spells outdoors. It can be taken indoors for use as a living Christmas tree.
Stockists Available from 110 licensed retail nurseries in Australia or on the internet from Garden Express at www.gardenexpress.com.au, phone 1800 677 437. Buy about \$55 for a 150mm pot or \$95 for an advanced 200mm pot (plus delivery charges if buying mail order). For more information, go to www.wollemipine.com or phone 1800 965 536.



POTTED HISTORY

Until 1994, the Wollemi pine was known to botanists only from fossil records. But nestled in a canyon in the remote Wollemi National Park on the outskirts of Sydney was a cluster of trees. David Noble, left, a National Parks and Wildlife Service employee, stumbled on them while on a bushwalk.

He thought the tall, pine-like trees were strange. They had bubbly bark, many were multi-branching and the leaves looked more like a cycad or a fern than a conifer. The tallest tree was about 40 metres. He took some samples with him to have the plant identified.

Botanists from the Royal Botanic Gardens quickly realised what they had on their hands. The tree was allocated its own genus of Wollemia in honour of the park. The species name of nobilis honours David Noble.

Wollemia nobilis is closely related to araucarias such as *Araucaria bidwillii* (the bunya pine), *A. cunninghamia* (hoop

pine) and *A. heterophylla* (the Norfolk Island pine). These trees are well-known along the east coast of Australia.

The NPWS and the Royal Botanic Gardens decided the best way to protect the wild stand of about 100 Wollemi pines from plunder or vandalism was through mass propagation. Once the plant was out in the marketplace, the wild stand would be safe from theft, though still vulnerable to natural disaster such as fire, drought or disease.

Back in the canyon in Wollemi National Park, the trees have been extensively studied and the surrounding area has been scoured for more trees. The location of the stand has been kept secret and few people have visited. Despite these measures, the latest report on the trees is that the soil-borne rootrot disease phytophthora has been found in the soil on the site. It may have been carried in on the shoes of bushwalkers.

Photo: Sahlan-Hayes