

# The amusing monkey-puzzle tree a true delight

By Susan Yost, Ph.D.

Delaware State University

Here's a plant that can bring a smile to your face — the monkey-puzzle tree, *Araucaria araucana*. Amusing and fascinating for both its name and appearance, this tree has an oddly reptilian look with its long branches covered with triangular leaves. But be wary before you try to monkey around with this tree — the leaves are really sharp! The unique branching structure is said to have led to the common name, apparently from a comment that a monkey would be puzzled trying to climb it.

Monkey-puzzle tree belongs to the ancient *Araucaria* family (*Araucariaceae*), cone-bearing evergreen trees mostly of the southern hemisphere.

Monkey-puzzle tree is native to South America, where it grows on the lower slopes of the Andes Mountains of Chile and Argentina. This species is now protected, since it was over-harvested for its wood in the past.

The monkey-puzzle tree prefers cool moist conditions, and thrives when planted in places like San Francisco, Vancouver, and England. It prefers well-drained soil, and regular watering. It may be hardy as far north as Delaware, where it is now being sold in some of our local nurseries.

One monkey-puzzle tree grew to be

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quite tall at Rockwood Manor in Delaware, but unfortunately it has been cut down.

In its natural habitat, the monkey-puzzle tree can grow to more than 100 feet tall, but apparently usually considerably less tall when planted elsewhere. Have you ever seen one of those cell-phone towers disguised to look like a tree? These actually resemble monkey-puzzle trees more than any other tree that I can think of. This species is usually dioecious, with separate male and female trees.

A familiar relative of the monkey-puzzle tree is the Norfolk Island pine (*Araucaria heterophylla*), named for its native island near Australia. The "pine" part is a misnomer, as *Araucaria* is not in the pine family. This tropical tree is now commonly sold as a small potted plant around the winter holiday season.

Decorated with a red ribbon, it resembles a miniature Christmas tree. Norfolk Island pine makes a nice house plant; ours has grown to ceiling-height and we've decorated it as a holiday tree on a few occasions.

Another relative of the monkey-puzzle

tree, with a possibly even stranger name, is the bunya-bunya tree, *Araucaria bidwillii*. The common name is derived from the name given it by the Aborigines in its native country, Australia.

The discovery in 1994 of another species in the *Araucaria* family, the Wollemi pine (*Wollemia nobilis*), has been described as "the botanical find of the 20th century". It's remarkable that dozens of these large trees, growing in a remote valley of Australia, were overlooked by scientists until just 16 years ago.

We've recently planted a small monkey-puzzle tree at Delaware State University (in the hope that it will be hardy here), where it is stimulating curiosity and interest — Curious George would probably like this tree.

*On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost, Herbarium Educator) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, or for more information about this article.*



Delaware State University/Dr. Susan Yost  
The monkey-puzzle tree (*Araucaria araucana*) is an eye-catching tree native to South America.