

## Wollemi Pine (*Wollemia nobilis*) and Its Introduction to Cultivation in Great Britain and Ireland<sup>©</sup>

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### INTRODUCTION

The Wollemi pine (*Wollemia nobilis*) was discovered within the Wollemi National Park, a virtually untouched wilderness area of 361,000 ha in the Blue Mountains, 200 km north west of Sydney Australia. It was found on 10 Sept. 1994, when a park ranger was exploring the deep canyons in the park. Wollemi is an Australian Aboriginal word which means “stop, and look around you.” The ranger, David Noble, knew most of the tree species in the Park and he must have followed this Aboriginal saying when he stumbled across a grove of enormous trees unlike any that he had seen before. When I spoke to him on his visit to the U.K. in April 2006, he said it was a very strange sensation being in that canyon and even then, it evoked feelings and thoughts of the fairly recent film of that time, Jurassic Park.

Noble collected a section of foliage to show his colleagues at the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service. It was soon established that the tree belonged to the Araucariaceae, the same family as the monkey puzzle, Norfolk Island pine, and less well known trees such as the hoop, bunya, and kauri pines. Further investigation, including help from the Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney, revealed that this was, in fact, a completely new genus of tree. It was named for the place where it was found and its discoverer.

Trees with the same foliage as *W. nobilis* had only previously been recognised in fossils that dated back 90 million years. Now fewer than 100 mature trees are known to exist in the wild, in just a couple of secret locations within the Wollemi National Park. The privileged few guests that have been allowed to visit the site have been made to wear blindfolds while on the helicopter trip into the canyon, as the Australian authorities are so worried about interference, destruction, and the spread of diseases which may affect the site if there are too many unauthorized visitors.

### SOME KEY PLANT CHARACTERISTICS

The tree produces a silvery excretion — the so-called “polar caps” — on its dormant buds, particularly during the colder months. This is thought to have helped it survive many ice ages when Australasia was part of the Gondwana super continent. When spring arrives, new growth bursts through these caps.

This new emerging growth is just one of several different types of foliage produced by the tree. New juvenile frond-like foliage is apple green and changes to blue-green as the plant grows. More mature foliage has two rows of leaves on the branches. Foliage becomes bronze coloured in the colder months.

One of the first things that Noble noticed when he discovered the stand of trees was their peculiar bubble-textured bark, reminiscent of bubbling chocolate. Trees begin to demonstrate this characteristic from about 5 years of age.

Wollemi pines have the habit of developing multiple stems, possibly an evolutionary defence against drought, fire, or rock fall. One of the oldest trees in the canyons is more than 1000 years old with about 100 stems.

Male and female cones are produced by the same tree, on the tips of separate branches. Wollemi pines are thought to produce these cones at around 9 years old, but only become sexually mature after 12 to 15 years. So far, only male cones have been seen on trees in the U.K. and no seed has yet been produced.

### INTRODUCTION TO THE TRADE

The introduction of this plant into cultivation has been a unique project in which commercial nurseries and the gardening public have been able to participate in the conservation of a rare and endangered species.

Wollemi Pine Australia was set up to propagate Wollemi pines to ensure the species' long-term survival. This has been achieved through vegetative propagation using a new, hi-tech nursery in Gimpie, Queensland, Australia. This is where all the trees currently in cultivation originated. A "first generation" group of 292 cultivated trees were sold at a Sotheby's auction held in Sydney in October 2005. All were 6 or 7 years old, with provenance back to the original wild trees. All profits from the auction were used for conservation of this and other endangered species. Some 15 of these original trees ended up in the U.K.

The next focus of the project was on a worldwide mass market release. This has occurred, at least in part, in Russia, Japan, U.S.A. and Europe, including now in the U.K. Kernock Park Plants — through its link with Proven Winners which is the European license holder for the Wollemi pine — became the sole appointed grower and distributor of the Wollemi pine for the U.K. and Ireland.

One of the unique selling points of the Wollemi pine is that royalties from the sales fund conservation of the trees in the wild, and other threatened plant species both the U.K. and Australia. An education and promotional exercise in the U.K. started with a planting by Sir David Attenborough at Kew Gardens in May 2005. Since then, there have been several ceremonial plantings in various locations around the country.

The Royal Botanical Garden (RBG) Kew had been heavily involved initially with the Wollemi pine through Wollemi Pine Australia. Kernock Park Plants continued this alliance and made a donation to RBG Kew for every tree sold in 2006. A cheque for more than £21,000 was presented to the organisation in 2007 and the money was used for conservation projects within the gardens at Kew.

**Market Launch in the U.K. and Ireland.** We took the first delivery of liners from Australia in January 2006 along with a very limited number of larger 5-L trees. We predicted that the liners would be saleable in a 3-L pot at 40–45 cm tall by September 2006 and the 5-L trees, though very expensive, could be sold after a short period of quarantine. So to maintain the "buzz" initial sales were through our own dedicated website. Customers could reserve and pay for the 3-L tree online. We despatched around 400 3-L trees in September 2006 to these customers. The sales package included a certificate of authenticity, a pack of mycorrhizal fungus and a 16-page information and care booklet.

In September 2006 we started our search for retail partners to make the tree widely available to the public. Through exhibiting at Glee, the U.K.'s main garden and leisure trade exhibition, we gathered details of around 200 potential partners from which 75 submitted an expression of interest. We then appointed outlets based on commitment to media, advertising, and promotional activities; commitment to minimum stock levels; and geographic location. From November 2006 we started

appointing retail partners and by December the first garden centres were able to display trees and take advance orders.

We believed that telling the story of the history and discovery of the tree would be crucial to successful sales so a strategy that engaged the retailer and hence the consumer was imperative. Because the product was high value we didn't expect retailers to stock large numbers so the idea of pre-selling the tree to consumers was conceived. This involved the retailers installing a display of the Wollemi pine, along with other add-on sales items in their outlets. Consumers who pre-purchased a tree took away a certificate pack which included the certificate, the care booklet, and the pack of mycorrhizal fungus. To enable appointed retailers to construct a "destination" within their store we created or sourced various point-of-sale promotional materials — including 3 m × 2 m, museum-standard, model velociraptor dinosaurs. We also commissioned a 4-min loop DVD telling the story of the tree's discovery, along with tips on caring for the Wollemi pine. We also secured sponsorship from Emirates airline and Tourism New South Wales of a prize of a trip for two to Australia to see the home of the Wollemi pine.

The Wollemi pine had an "official launch" in the U.K. at the 2007 Royal Horticultural Society's Chelsea Flower Show. To coincide with this, we sent an invitation to our pre-purchase customers to return to their garden centre to collect their trees. We promoted this as "Wollemi Weekend" and the garden centres had various promotions of their own surrounding it, including "celebrity" guests presenting the trees to the customers and Australian-themed events.

**Sales Performance.** During our pre-marketing research we found that the highest sales for a tree to the domestic U.K. market in the previous 5 years had been the *Salix cinerea* 'Kilmarnock' — other than rooted Christmas trees, there were no conifers in the top 10. We haven't got an accurate figure for exactly how many of the willows are sold each year in the U.K. but several garden centres have said that their sales were over 50. The retail price for a grafted 1–1.5 m willow varies from £16.95 to £29.95. As of the end of July 2008 we have one retailer that has sold nearly 200 Wollemi pines at £100 each since starting pre-sales just before Christmas 2006, and other retailers who have sold up to 100 trees. Sales at this sort of level suggest that the Wollemi pine is among the top sellers in its category in 2007 and excluding Christmas trees is the top selling conifer.