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Araucaria araucana

[Synonyms : *Araucaria chilensis*, *Araucaria dombeyi*, *Araucaria imbricata*, *Columbea angustifolia*, *Columbea quadrifaria*, *Dombeya chilensis*, *Pinus araucana*]

MONKEY PUZZLE is an evergreen tree. Native to Chile, Argentina, northern Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego it has golden-scaled cones.

It is also known as *Andentanne* (German), *Apeboom* (Dutch), *Apepuzzel* (Dutch), *Araucaria de Chile* (Spanish), *Araucária do Chile* (Portuguese), *Araucaria du Chili* (French), *Araucaria espinuda* (Spanish), *Araucaria imbricada* (Spanish), *Araukárie chilská* (Czech), *Blahočet chilský* (Czech), *Bourreau des singes* (French), *Brödgran* (Swedish), Chilean pine, *Chilenaraukaria* (Finnish), *Chilenische Araukarie* (German), *Chilenische Schmucktanne* (German), Chile nuts, Chile pine, *Désespoir des singes* (French), Monkey puzzle tree, *Paranagran* (Swedish), Parana pine, *Pehuén* (Portuguese), *Pin du Chili* (French), *Pinheiro-brasileiro* (Portuguese), *Pinheiro do Chile* (Portuguese), *Pinheiro do paraná* (Portuguese), *Pino de brazos* (Spanish), *Pino de Chile* (Spanish), *Pino de Neuquen* (Spanish), *Piñón* (Spanish), *Piñonero* (Spanish), *Rompicapo-scimmia* (Italian), and *Yoroi sugi* (Japanese).

In 1998 the World Conservation Monitoring Centre issued the first global list (referred to colloquially as the ‘Red List’) of threatened plants. The combination of the natural fact that monkey puzzle produces seed infrequently and the effects of indiscriminate logging has led to the tree’s inclusion on the List as it is now thought to be rare in the wild and threatened with extinction there. With specific reference to Chilean trees, from January 2002 the monkey puzzle only has also been included under Appendix I of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora). This means that only limited trade for scientific or conservation purposes is sanctioned and that relevant governments are required to obtain appropriate export and import licences.

Araucana means ‘of or from the Arauco district in Chile’ and, for some, also honours the Araucari Chile Indian tribe.

The name Monkey puzzle is said by some authorities to be a description of the tangled appearance of the branches, while others contend that the closely leaf-clothed branches explain a legend that although a monkey could climb the tree he would be unable to make his way down again. The common name is also often attributed to Sir William Molesworth (1810-1855) an English politician who had an estate at Pencarrow in Cornwall (in the English West Country). In 1834 when he was performing a ceremonial planting of one of these trees there he pricked his hand badly and in his distress is said to have declared

It would be a puzzle to a monkey!

Authorities describe how the monkey puzzle was cultivated in Britain from about 1795. [Some pundits mention that the Scottish botanist and surgeon, Archibald Menzies (1754-1842) who sailed with George Vancouver (1757-1798) to Australia, New Zealand and North America, is supposed to have dined with the Viceroy of Chile in the last year of his trip and, from his host’s table, pocketed some of the edible seeds served during the meal. These are said to have been planted once he returned home.] There the tree gained an

increasing popularity from about 1844 and this peaked towards the end of the Victorian era when it became a familiar sight in many an estate or garden.

The edible brown seeds are sometimes called Chile nuts and are usually eaten roasted.

Since the tree has arrived in Britain it has managed to attract some superstitions. One still supported by some even today holds that talking as you pass under the tree attracts three years' bad luck.

Although the pale yellowish wood has been used for timber the trees are rarely cut down for this purpose.

The Malleco National Reserve in Chile was one of the locations for the BBC's television series *Walking with Dinosaurs* (an animated documentary of fact and authoritative guestimate showing the world when dinosaurs were alive) first broadcast from 2000. This Reserve is also home to the monkey puzzle. But authorities noted in 2003 that it was the scene of a real life devastating forest fire that destroyed 71% of these trees (many of them at least 2000 years old) which meant that only a few small areas of them remained. It was also mentioned that a local nursery was being established (funded by the British Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) to raise more monkey puzzles but that this project will take decades to reach fruition as trees of this species need to mature for a century before they will produce any of their infrequent seeds.