

# The Pacific Connections of the Monkey Puzzle Tree

BY LIISA WIHMAN



Driving past the recently planted Pacific Connections “Gateway to Chile” garden in the Washington Park Arboretum, several young, healthy specimens of the monkey puzzle tree, *Araucaria araucana*, catch one’s eye with their slightly

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**ABOVE:** A young monkey puzzle tree in the Pacific Connections “Gateway to Chile” garden at the Washington Park Arboretum. (Photos by Liisa Wihman.)

A Tudor Revival-style house in Seattle, with a young monkey puzzle tree on the front lawn. (Photo by Asahel Curtis, early 20th century. Special Collections, UW Libraries, Seattle.)



alien form and scaly needles spiraling out from their regularly whorled branches. Given its distinctive looks, many gardeners are familiar with this unusual conifer, but only a few probably know that the monkey puzzle's connection with the Pacific shores of North America predates the Euro-American settlement here.

The national tree of Chile, monkey puzzles are one of the oldest-living plant species. Dating back to the days of dinosaurs, their large, prickly needles seem very well suited to protect them from the attacks of hungry vertebrates. They are hardy and extremely long-lived; some specimens in the Chilean forests are well over 1000 years old. Traditionally, the monkey puzzle has been an important plant for the indigenous peoples of the southern Andes Mountains and provided them with firewood and timber. It also has been used for medicinal purposes, and has even played a part in harvest and fertility ceremonies. Its large, cream-colored seeds (that resemble giant pine nuts covered in a cinnamon-brown husk) have been an important source of food, and their taste—that I've unfortunately not yet been able to try—is described as rich and delicious.<sup>1</sup>

It was its culinary value that became the monkey puzzle's ticket to the world outside Chile. In 1792, Captain George Vancouver's expedition explored the Pacific Northwest in search for the legendary Northwest Passage (expected to exist north of the Bering Strait), continuing the work started by Captain Cook 14

years earlier. Archibald Menzies, a Scottish doctor and plant-hunting explorer, worked as the appointed naturalist on Vancouver's expedition, and he collected seeds and plants wherever the expedition stopped. During this successful voyage, Menzies described and recorded hundreds of species that were new to botany, like Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*), evergreen and trailing Oregon grapes (*Berberis aquifolium* and *B. nervosa*), flowering currant (*Ribes sanguineum*), Pacific Madrone tree (*Arbutus menziesii*) and Pacific rhododendron (*Rhododendron macrophyllum*).

On the way back to Britain in 1793, Captain Vancouver stopped in Chile. There the expedition members were invited to dine with the country's governor and were served a local delicacy that contained monkey puzzle seeds. Always a curious botanist, Menzies saved some of his tasty seeds and cultivated them in a frame on the ship's deck. Five healthy, young plants made it back to Great Britain and were planted there in 1795, creating great excitement in the horticultural circles. But it was only in 1844 that plant collector William Lobb, who worked for

<sup>1</sup>As the species has become endangered due to destruction of its original habitats by logging and forest fires, it was provided the highest form of protection available for plants in 2002 when it was included in Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).



the Veitch Nurseries in England, was able to procure enough viable seeds for commercial cultivation so that the plant could start its journey to horticultural stardom.

The monkey puzzle tree, which commercial nurseries started propagating during the second half of the 19th century, quickly became one of the trendiest of the Victorian era—often appearing as botanical showpieces on the grounds of Britain’s great estates. As with so

many other garden trends and novelties from Europe, this one also was embraced by newcomers on the Pacific shores from British Columbia to California. From the late 19th to early 20th centuries, pictures of residential houses often show monkey puzzles proudly planted as solitary specimens on the front lawns. Some of them have survived—still thriving in the temperate Pacific climates—and are now, over a century later, huge trees that have

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**ABOVE:** Two magnificent *Araucaria* specimens in front of a stately, century-old house on Capitol Hill in Seattle. Probably planted as small saplings soon after the Arts and Crafts-style house was built in 1909, their umbellate canopies now form a decorative but prickly portal by the main entrance. Both trees bear large cones. (Photo by Liisa Wilhman.)



sometimes outgrown their allocated spaces.

Today, the monkey puzzle has lost its star status as a residential garden plant in the Pacific Northwest, and it is seldom included on the plant selections of local nurseries. But the latest craze being integration of edibles into all parts of one's garden (from flower borders to meadows), monkey puzzles—those unusual conifers with edible seeds—might be due for a second period of popularity. Two drawbacks need to be considered, however: First, only female plants produce seeds; to get results, at least one male and one female tree need to be planted. Second, since it takes a couple of decades before the monkey puzzle starts to

produce seeds, buying a property with old trees is the shortest way to acquire a crop. Despite the fact that a mature, single tree can yield thousands of delicious seeds each season, the conifer kitchen gardener may very well need to figure out how to reap the harvest before jays and squirrels snatch them. ☺

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**ABOVE:** The thick, scaly leaves of *Araucaria araucana* spiral around both branches and trunk. (Photo by Liisa Wihman.)