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PERSONAL JOURNAL

Coming to Your Backyard: *Movement Aims to Inspire People to Grow Rare Plants; A Nearly Extinct Tree* *A Lily That Jefferson Loved*

By BART ZIEGLER

THE WOLLEMI PINE IS so ancient that it may have provided shade and sustenance to the dinosaurs. Though the tree was thought to be extinct for two million years, a small pocket of the evergreens eventually was discovered in the wilds of Australia. Now you can buy it for \$99.95 and grow it in your house or yard.

The Wollemi Pine represents the latest offering in a movement by horticulturalists and retailers to preserve rare plants by encouraging people to grow them at home. The National Geographic Society announced yesterday it is selling the Wollemi through its holiday gift catalog.

As Web sites selling unusual plants have proliferated, consumers have gained the opportunity to plant disease-resistant elms to replace the millions lost to Dutch elm disease starting in the 1930s,

preserve rare tulip bulbs threatened with extinction by growing them in their garden, or sow tomato seeds their grandparents may have raised but which were nearly lost to modern agriculture.

Scott Kunst, who sells old and endangered flower bulbs through his Old House Gardens catalog, says he's seen sales increase about 10% a year for the past three years. "Some of our bulbs are so rare that we never have enough to satisfy the demand," he says. Among the attractions of raising rare bulbs, he says, is neighbors aren't likely to grow the same things. And, he notes: "If it's also a lily that Thomas Jefferson loved, that adds even more to its interest or value in the garden."

Plus

A sampling of places to find rare plants for the garden.

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The rare Wollemi pine—in the wild and in captivity

It's all part of a growing vogue for "heirloom" vegetables and flowers. These are plants that were popular 50 or more years ago but in some cases almost died out after breeders created modern hybrids and people stopped growing the old varieties.

Of course, heirloom plants can be pricey. At Old House Gardens, one Golden Standard tulip bulb—a variety dating from 1760—costs more \$19, while common tulip bulbs can be had for 50 cents or less. And some heirloom varieties are less hardy than the hybrids later developed. But many do well in home gardens.

Growing plants outside of their native habitat is one way conservationists try to save them. Ideally,

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Coming to Your Backyard: A Nearly Extinct Tree

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conservationists would want plants to be preserved in their natural environment. But experts estimate that 100,000 plants world-wide face extinction due to loss of habitat, overharvesting, predators and other reasons. Botanic gardens historically have been the main place such plants have been preserved, but in recent years attempts have been made to save plants by selling them to home gardeners.

Steven Clemants, vice president of science at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden in New York, says consumer-sales programs provide several benefits. They reduce the incentive for rogue plant hunters to harvest the plants in the wild and create a revenue stream from royalties that can help in the conservation effort. Moreover, he says, "you never know what could happen to the native habitat," so if for some reason the original plants are destroyed they could be reintroduced from the plants raised elsewhere.

Another plant that conservationists are trying to rescue is the "cabbage on a stick" or Hawaii palm (*Brighamia insignis*). Though it was once common on the Hawaiian islands, there are now believed to be just seven naturally occurring ones. These odd-looking succulents have a cluster of spoon-shaped leaves atop a stout, bare stem, giving them their name. To help save them, experts

are working with Dutch nurseries to introduce them as houseplants.

The Wollemi Pine, though, is perhaps the most unusual plant that conservationists hope to protect by distributing it commercially. Scientists have long known such trees once existed, since fossils have been found containing samples of them dating back 90 million years. But everyone assumed the plant had gone extinct.

Then, in 1994, a park ranger hiking in Australia found a grove of odd-looking evergreens in a remote rainforest gorge. Sensing they were special, the hiker, David Noble, took a sample to experts, who determined it was a completely new genus and a descendant of the fossilized plants. They gave it the name *Wollemia nobilis*, honoring where it was discovered, Wollemi National Park, as well as Mr. Noble.

Since then, fewer than 100 of the trees have been found in the same rainforest. Scientists fear they could be destroyed by plant hunters or curious hikers, so they haven't disclosed the plants' precise location. To ensure the new genus survives they decided to have a commercial nursery propagate the trees and sell them to consumers. Sales in Australia and Great Britain started earlier this year and now the National Geographic Society has become the exclusive retailer in the U.S.

The National Geographic Society has tens of thousands of the plants available this fall, each 10-12 inches tall, says Krista Newberry, a vice president of licensing at the Washington, D.C., nonprofit group. Come next spring, the society also will sell them through a limited number of independent garden centers. A portion of the proceeds will go to the Australian group that works to conserve the Wollemi Pine; Ms. Newberry declined to disclose the amount. National Geographic is working with Floragem, a plant marketing and branding company, to carry out the program.

The Wollemi Pine—actually not a member of the pine family—grows about 130 feet tall in the wild. Instead of needles it has thin dark green leaves that resemble fronds of a fern, while its brown bark looks a bit like bubbling chocolate. It tends to grow with multiple trunks, and its ability to generate new trunks when existing ones are destroyed is believed to be one reason the plants survived.

The trees can live in temperatures as low as 23 degrees, so they can be planted outdoors in much of the southern half of the country. Elsewhere, they can be grown as houseplants in a bright room, where they won't become nearly as tall as in nature. Experts are testing them in temperatures as low as 10 degrees, so their outdoor growing range may be expanded.