

6/21/2005 A Dragon in the Arid Dome - ARID DOME

On a small "island" along the walk of the Arid Dome is the Dragon Tree, *Dracaena draco*. Two characteristics of this tree may have led to its name. After pruning or flowering, it branches, resulting in a "multi-headed" look. In Greek mythology, a multi-headed dragon guarded the golden apples that Hercules had been assigned to obtain as the eleventh of his 12 labors. According to legend, these trees sprouted up from the blood when the dragon was killed. The connection to the idea of a dragon is enhanced by the dark red resin produced in the bark of the trees. It was marketed as "dragon's blood" during medieval times and was considered to have magical and medicinal qualities. Today, the resin is still used for incense, as a dye, and as a wood varnish for items such as violins.

The dragon tree produces clusters of greenish-white flowers at the end of the branches, followed by orange berries. It is very slow growing and can require a decade to reach 2-3 ft. Dragon trees often grow to immense size and can live over 1,000 years. They are native to the Canary Islands and adapted to the arid, rocky mountain climate where they are a popular tree in landscapes, but an endangered species in the wild.

Approximately 500 hundred years ago, before the arrival of the Spanish in the Canary Islands, the fruit of the Dragon Tree was the staple food of an endemic, Dodo-like, flightless bird that is now extinct. It is possible that passing Dragon Tree seeds through the digestive tract of this bird helped stimulate germination, so the loss of this bird species may have caused a decline in naturally occurring Dragon Trees.

*Dracaena*, which means female dragon, is a genus of about 40 species of trees and succulent shrubs the monocot group of plants. The majority of the species are native to Africa and nearby islands, with a few in southern Asia and one in tropical Central America. Some *Dracena* species are trees with stout trunks and stiff, sword-shaped leaves, grow in arid semi-desert areas, and are known as Dragon Trees. Another group includes smaller, shrubby species that grow as under story trees in rainforests. They are very popular as foliage houseplants with a variety of leaf colors and patterns. So you may have a dragon in your living room.