

8/25/2009 Ponytail Plant - ARID DOME

The ponytail plant grows in the Arid Dome. It is sometimes wrongly called the ponytail palm, but it is more closely related to agave or yucca than palm trees. These related plants are native to Mexico. They used to be in the same botanical family, but recent reclassification has separated them into different families. The scientific name is *Beaucarnea recurvata*.

The common name ponytail plant comes from the thick mop of long, straplike leaves that are in a cluster at the top of the plant. The tree keeps its leaves and replaces them only when they are removed by a storm or other injury. This plant is something like a camel because it can survive for long dry periods using the water that is stored in its swollen trunk. The bark of the swollen base of the plant looks very much like the rough skin of an elephant, so another common name for this plant is “elephant foot.”

Ponytail plants can grow to 6 feet in a container, but grow to 30 feet outdoors. They grow very slowly. This makes them good house plants because they do not need a lot of care and do not outgrow their pots for a long time. Seeds and plants are available at many commercial websites, such as gflora.com which provided the image accompanying this article.

Mature plants produce many, small, creamy-white flowers on long panicles. You can sometimes see them in bloom at the Domes. They may flower two or three times a year. Ponytail plants are dioecious which means that some plants are male and produce only pollen, and some plants are female and produce seeds after pollination. A number of insects, and possibly bats, pollinate the flowers.

Next time you visit the Arid Dome, look for the ponytail plant. How many can you find? Do you think the Dr. Seuss was inspired by this plant when he drew some of the imaginative creatures in his book “If I Ran the Zoo”?

