

4/1/2010 The Moringa Tree in the ARID DOME- Extinct in the wild? Maybe not quite❖

A Hildebrandt's moringa tree (*Moringa hildebrandtii*) lives in the Arid Dome. It was named by a botanist named Hildebrandt in 1880. Our specimen was grown from seed by Richard Risch, former director of the Mitchell Park Domes. The seeds came to him from Madagascar where the moringa originated. Since the Disney movie, most people now know that Madagascar is the large island country on the southeast coast of Africa. Until recently, the moringa was thought to be extinct in the wild. The only known living specimens were in villages in Madagascar, in horticultural collections, and in plantings in warm climates such as Florida. In 2007, a report in a British journal described finding a few trees in the wild in Madagascar.

Our moringa tree has a massive, water-storing trunk which is covered by a smooth, light gray bark. Different moringa species have different kinds of trunks, but the Hildebrandt's moringa belongs to the group called the "bottle trees" because of their bloated shape. A general term for a plant like this is "caudiciform," which describes plants that have leaves during part of the year and live on food and water stored in the trunk during long, dry spells. Another example of a caudiciform tree in the Arid Dome is the ponytail plant (*Beaucarnea recurvata*). (see past article).

Hildebrandt's moringa is adapted to living in arid climates where it may grow as high as 60 feet. The leaves are double compound and composed of leaflets which are small, oval, and smooth-edged. In a compound leaf, such as walnut leaves, there are leaflets along the leaf stem. In double compound leaves, there are leaf stems that branch off the main leaf stem, such as the Kentucky coffee tree. An entire moringa leaf can be nearly three feet long with a leaf stem that is often dark red in color. Each whitish flower produces a capsule fruit that looks like a large bean pod and can be up to a foot long. Each fruit contains six to twelve, large nutlike seeds.

There are thirteen *Moringa* species, two of which are native to Madagascar. *Moringa oleifera*, which is native to India, is well known for its economic value as a source of nutritious leaves, high quality oil from the seeds of the plant, and other uses. Little is known about the potential economic value of the other *Moringa* species which are most closely related to the mustard family and the caper family.

Look for the tall, gray-barked Hildebrandt's moringa next time you visit the Arid Dome. Horticultural collections such as the Mitchell Park Domes help plants from becoming extinct as they continue to disappear from the wild.



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