

4/9/2011 The Sausage Tree in The TROPICAL DOME - But Don't Try to Eat These!

Brats and other sausages are very popular in Milwaukee, but you probably don't think of tropical Africa when eating them. The fruit of the "sausage tree" are not edible anyway. *Kigelia pinnata* (also known as *K. africana*) is hard to miss in the Tropical Dome. The tree can grow to 60 feet in height and has gray bark. The wood is not used commercially. Its scientific name comes from the leaflets of the compound leaves that form oppositely along the leaf stems. The leaves fall off each spring, but regrow almost immediately in the Domes because the tree is continuously watered. Deciduous leaves are an adaptation for reducing water loss in tropical areas where there is a dry season each year.

Some plants have really eye-catching ways of reproducing, and the sausage tree certainly qualifies in this area. It produces very long stems that hang down from the upper branches. Large, fragrant, maroon flowers form at the ends. They open only at night because they are pollinated by bats looking for pollen and nectar.

An unusual feature of this plant is the sausage-shaped fruit that form after pollination. They can be up to 2 feet long and weigh up to 10 pounds. Don't plant one of these where they can fall on someone's head or car! The fresh fruit are poisonous to people, but are eaten by baboons, elephants, giraffes, hippos, and other animals. The fruit are woody berries with pulp and many seeds inside. The seeds are dispersed in the dung of the animals that eat them.

Look for the long stems hanging from the sausage tree in the Tropical Dome. You may see closed flowers and, if you are lucky, some of the "sausages." They don't usually get as big as they do in the wild, but watch your head just in case!



*Photo courtesy of the National Tropical Botanical Garden*