

## The Spiny Thickets of Madagascar: *Alluaudia* species

In the dry southern end of Madagascar are thickets of spiny plants adapted to a desert environment. The Arid Dome has a number of interesting plants from this fourth largest island in the world, thanks to Richard Risch, former Domes director. Many of them are found wild nowhere else on Earth except Madagascar. Madagascar has a variety of environments ranging from rainforests to deserts, so the plants and animals from this island country are just as variable.

*Alluaudia* species are tall strange-looking trees with whitish gray bark and few branches. They just seem to continue to grow upward like a telephone pole as high as 30-50 feet. The trunks are covered with spirals of small, round, succulent leaves. To discourage native animals, such as lemurs, from eating the leaves, the trunk is covered with parallel spirals of very sharp, tapering thorns. During the dry season, the trees lose their leaves in Madagascar.

You probably won't see the flowers that are sometimes produced at the very top of the tree. *Alluaudia* trees produce male flowers on one tree and female flowers on another. Of the several different species, the Domes specimen is *Alluaudia ascendens*. It does not have a familiar common name.

This spiny tree might remind you of the ocotillo plant (*Fouquieria splendens*) that has bright red flowers and is commonplace in Mexico and the southwestern United States. In fact, it is sometimes called the Madagascar ocotillo. These trees are unrelated biologically, but they are a wonderful example of the parallel evolution of plants trying to survive in a similarly harsh, dry environment.

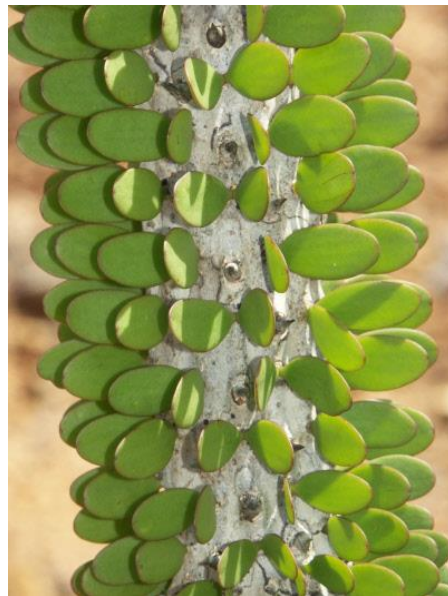


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