# *Encephalartos woodii*

**ELSA POOLEY** writes about the mysterious enigma Wood's cycad, a plant that is extinct in the wild.

Wood's cycad is one of the most magnificent and rare plants of this family of ancient plants. It has been extinct in the wild for nearly a century. Only one four-stemmed male plant was ever found. It was first collected by John Medley Wood, director of the Natal Government Herbarium and leading Natal botanist. He was on a botanical expedition in Zululand in 1895, and found it when exploring Ngoye Forest (now spelt Ongoye). In 1903 several suckers

*Encephalartos woodii* growing in Durban Botanic Gardens.

photograph © Richard Boon

were collected for the Durban Botanic Gardens and for the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew and a private nurseryman in the south of England. (It was described in the *Gardeners' Chronicle* in 1908.) In 1907 John Wylie, an assistant to Medley Wood and curator of the Durban Botanic Gardens, collected two of the large trunks and planted them in the Durban Botanic Garden. In 1916 the last surviving stem was removed and was planted in Pretoria. All efforts to locate more plants – and female plants – in the original location have failed. However, hundreds of offshoots have been grown and distributed around the world, so the plant is known outside of South Africa.

This is a distinctive species. The original plants stand about 6m tall, with a stately, erect stem which is broad and buttressed at the base. This buttressed stem, and the spreading canopy of arching leaves, even in juvenile plants, distinguishes the species. The leaves are up to 2.5m long, the dark green leaflets up to 200 × 50mm, reduced to prickles at base. The lower margins are sometimes toothed. Leaflets on the young sucker plants can be 2-5 toothed on one or both margins and have a characteristic pattern of lobes. The large cones are a luminous orange, 400-900mm long and up to 200mm in diameter.

There are some botanists who consider *E. woodii* to be a robust form of the more common *E. natalensis.* The orange cones and arching leaves, even in juvenile plants, are the main characters which separate *E. woodii* from *E. natalensis* which has more yellow cones, leaves not arching and a main stem which is not erect and buttressed.



A note on the original collector and the Durban Botanic Gardens seems useful. John Medley Wood 1827-1915, was born in England and died in Durban. He farmed in Natal, just outside of Durban until 1882 when he took on the post of Curator of the Durban Botanic Garden. This appointment was on condition that the job included the development of a herbarium, which would include his own collection of specimens. He had already published work on Natal ferns. The botanic gardens had a responsibility to develop plants for agriculture in the colonies, and Medley Wood is credited with the establishment of the most successful variety of sugar cane to be used in the sugar industry in Natal. He introduced many ornamental plants and trees in the Botanic Garden. His best known published works are *Natal Plants* (6 volumes) and *A handbook of the flora of Natal*. The Medley Wood house and the Natal Herbarium buildings built in

The large cone of *Encephalartos woodii*.

photograph © Geoff Nichols

1902 still serve as herbarium and administration offices today. In 1903 Wood was appointed Director of the Durban Botanic Gardens, with Wylie becoming curator. The gardens were transferred to the municipality in 1913 due to financial problems on the part of government (related to the Bambatha Rebellion). Wood remained director of the Natal Herbarium and Wylie became curator of the botanic garden.

*Encephalartos woodii*: plant established at the Durban BG with John Medley Wood, from a photo in the Kew Bulletin, 1914.

In 1913 the Kew Bulletin, in a short but sincere appeal, marked the end of a richly productive relationship between what had been a small colony and the world's finest botanical institution: "It must not be forgotten before passing on to the consideration of the National Botanic Gardens at Kirstenbosch that in Natal South Africa has possessed a botanic gardens for over fifty years where the true functions of such an institution have been ably maintained in spite of many difficulties. It is a matter of regret that the area of this garden is so small, but small though it be its maintenance is as important now as ever it was, and its activities must not be suffered to be curtailed or its functions abrogated owing to any change in its administration or the establishment of the new National Gardens." (quote from page 53, *Natal, The Garden Colony*, by D. P. McCracken and P. A. McCracken. 1990).



**Notes**

Durban Botanic Gardens is the oldest botanic gardens in Africa, established in 1851. IDS members on the trip to KwaZulu-Natal in 2010 enjoyed a rather rainy day amongst the magnificent collection of trees from around the world.

According to Eve Palmer *in Trees of Southern Africa* A A Balkema, 1972, there is an historic photograph of John Medley Wood standing next to a cycad in the Durban Botanic Gardens.

A close-up of the crown of Wood's cycad can be seen in Thomas Pakenham's book *In Search of Remarkable Trees – on Safari in Southern Africa* Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2007.

**References**

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