

Stangeria eriopus

Natal Grass Cycad

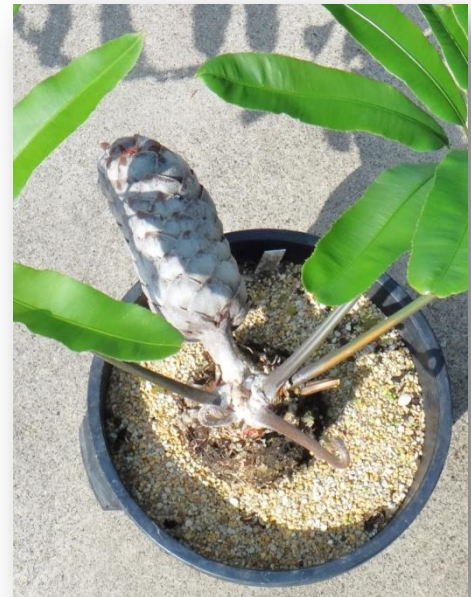
A cycad from southern Africa

Stangeria eriopus, the Natal Grass Cycad, is a native of southern Africa where it grows in grasslands and forests along the east coast of South Africa and Mozambique. This is an unusual cycad, as there is only one species in the genus and its closest relations are two species of *Bowenia* found in the tropical rainforests of far north Queensland. Both *Stangeria* and *Bowenia* belong to the plant family Stangeriaceae¹.



There is quite an interesting twist to the naming of this plant. Early collectors identified it as a fern, rather than a cycad. In 1829 it was described by Otto Kunze, a German botanist, as a new species of fern, *Lomaria eriopus*. It was not until 1851, when a plant collected by a Dr Stanger and growing in the Chelsea Physic Garden in London produced a cone, that it was finally identified as a cycad. In 1892 it was correctly named *Stangeria eriopus* by the French botanist Henri Baillon¹.

Cycads produce two different sorts of cones: pollen is produced in small cones on male plants; ovules, which later develop into seed, are produced in much larger cones on female plants. For a long time it was believed that cycads were wind pollinated, however insects (mostly beetles) are now considered to be the main pollen vectors. Cones emit an odour that attracts insect pollinators to male cones. Later, as the aroma intensifies, the insects are forced out of the male cones and migrate to female cones in which the odour is less intense. In the process they provide a mechanism by which pollen can be transported from male to female cones^{2,3}.



In South Africa *Stangeria* is harvested for traditional medicine by the Xhosa and Zulu people⁴ and the web page of the Palm & Cycad Societies of Australia reports that Zulu use *Stangeria* to protect houses from lightning. A house with a *Stangeria* plant on each corner of the house will supposedly never be struck by lightning⁵!

¹ Reference and modified map: Ken Hill, 2010, Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney, Plantnet, The Cycad Pages: <http://plantnet.rbgsyd.nsw.gov.au/cgi-bin/cycadpg?taxname=Stangeria+eriopus>

² Stevenson, D.W.M., Norstog, K.J. & Fawcett, P.K.S.:
Pollination Biology of Cycads <http://www.plantapalm.com/vce/biology/pollination.htm>

³ Pennisi, K. 2007. Leading Pollinators by the nose. Science Now:
<http://news.sciencemag.org/sciencenow/2007/10/04-02.html>

⁴ John Winter, 2006, Kirstenbosch Botanic Gardens, Planzafrica:
<http://www.plantzafrica.com/plantqrs/votepplant.php>

⁵ Dove, J. Palm and Cycad Societies of Australia:
<http://www.pacsoa.org.au/cycads/Stangeria/eriopus.html>

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