

RARE TREE



Greg Kitson has fallen in love with Wollemi pines.



Christchurch's rare Wollemi pine in its protective cage.

JOURNEY'S END

How a Jurassic Age survivor made it to Christchurch.

WHEN New Zealand's first Wollemi pine was planted in the Christchurch Botanic Gardens earlier this year to mark the gardens' 150th anniversary, it signalled the culmination of a long journey.

Nearly 20 years ago, an Australian conservationist and field officer from the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service discovered a tree in a remote area of the huge Wollemi National Park in the Blue Mountains, 200km west of Sydney. The piece of foliage David Noble retrieved from the forest floor that day marks the beginning of the journey to discovery.

What he had found turned out to be a member of the Jurassic Age *Araucariaceae* family. Botanists identified it from fossils millions of years old and gave it the botanical name *Wollemia nobilis* to recognise the park where it was found and the man who discovered it. Ten years later, in 2004, the then curator of the Christchurch Botanic Gardens, Dr David Given, was offered a specimen for its planned Godwanaland garden but environmental regulations meant it could not be imported into New Zealand.

It was at this time that Canterbury nurseryman Greg Kitson, who with his wife Chris owns Ambrosia Nurseries, became involved. "I was approached at a conference in Christchurch back in 2004 and asked if I would be interested in representing the growing and marketing of the Wollemi pine here in New Zealand," he recalls. Not knowing what it actually was, he looked it up on the internet and was amazed when he read the story and flattered to be involved.

Greg's original plan was to import live cuttings from Australia as the Wollemi can't be grown from seed. However, getting it into the country was a long and arduous task. Working with the late Dr

Given, he prepared the botanical information required to submit the application to the Environmental Risk Management Authority. Part of the ERMA import process was to conduct an iwi consultation. Once it was proved the Wollemi wouldn't be a threat to New Zealand flora and fauna, Greg then had to apply to the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry for an "import health standard". After years of meetings and some rather heated exchanges, the plant was finally approved for importation.

However, imported cuttings are then subject to a minimum quarantine period, as are any live, bare-rooted plants that come into New Zealand. Ambrosia opted for quicker results by developing Wollemi pine tissue in this country. "We chose tissue as we could produce many plants way faster rather than building up mother stock for several more years," Greg says.

The result was the tree planted in Christchurch Botanic Gardens in January, nearly 10 years after the first offer of a tree from Australia. Another Wollemi pine, also grown from tissue, will feature at the Ellerslie International Flower Show in the Emerging Designers section, where two Ambrosia employees, Max Camphens and Johanna Blakely, have an entry.

Your own Wollemi pine

Logistics mean the Wollemi pine will not be widely available in New Zealand for another couple of years. Greg Kitson says numbers will be limited and if you wish to signal your interest in planting one of these living fossils, contact Ambrosia Nurseries at www.gardeningsolutionz.co.nz.