

Stop 312 Adult Tour – Elephant’s Foot, Succulent House

The most striking feature of this unusual succulent is the thick woody base that looks like a geometric sculpture. Although its grayish color makes it appear as though the plant is dead, it’s actually a living tuber that provides food storage for the plant. This edible tuber was once cooked and eaten as a famine food in South Africa. A member of the yam family, its resemblance to an elephant’s foot is what gives the plant its’ common name.

Conservatory Manager Rob Nicholson shares another fact about this unique plant.

Rob: *There’s a lot of steroidal compounds within these plants; the first birth control pills were derived from plant compounds that were in Mexican yams – and this is a South African relative.*

The Elephant’s Foot growing cycle is adapted to periods of drought. During the wet season, a vine-like shoot emerges from the top of the tuber. It grows rapidly, three to five inches a day, and produces heart-shaped leaves and small yellow flowers. When water becomes scarce, the vines die and the plant lies dormant for a few months until adequate moisture is once more available and the plant resumes growth.

Moving a special plant like this during the greenhouse renovation in 2003 was certainly a cause for concern among the garden’s staff. **Rob: *That was one we were really worried about because it’s probably a 30-year old plant, and you don’t like to lose all your heirloom specimens like that. And we were able to keep it alive and it seems very happy in its’ new home.***