

Stop 342 Adult Tour – *Encephalartos altensteinii*, Palm House

Rob: As you walk into the center bed of our Palm House, we've tried to have somewhat of a tropical garden, in that we have a walkway and potted plants, and ornamental foliage plants, and a nice bench for you to sit down and relax on. One of the plants that's behind this bench is a cycad from South Africa – it's *encephalartos altensteinii*.

The name *Encephalartos* comes from the Greek word 'cephale' meaning head and 'artos' meaning bread, referring to the starchy food found inside the stem, which was eaten by some indigenous tribes.

With their thick trunks and graceful leaf structure, cycads are sometimes mistaken for palms or ferns. But this plant is actually more closely related to trees that are very familiar to us here in New England – such as pines, spruces, and firs. Like those plants, cycads also produce seed-filled cones in order to reproduce. But this particular plant is a male, so any cones you see won't have seeds inside since only the female cycads produce them!

These cycads have a reputation for resilience; there are cases where some plants have been put back in the ground and started growing again after years of sitting inside a shed. This particular tree is thought to be one of the oldest cultivated cycads in the country. It was rescued from a fire at the Durfee Conservatory at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. Smith botany professor William Ganong and his students planted it in the Lyman Conservatory in the winter of 1895.

More than half of the more than 50 species of *Encephalartos* grow in South Africa, where they line busy streets and grace private gardens. But despite their robust nature, many of the hundreds of species of cycads are endangered or extinct in the wild. Obsessive collectors threaten the future of cycad's worldwide with their willingness to pay smugglers to raid cycad forests. Unfortunately, it's a lucrative business. In 1995, South African park rangers confiscated two semi-trailers filled with *Encephalartos altensteinii*. The 40 tons of cycads inside were valued at more than \$1 million.