



Onyanga (Desert Onion)



Plant Botanical Name:

Welwitschia mirabilis

USBG Plant Location:

Conservatory

Conservatory Room Location:

World Deserts

Plant Threat Level:

Rare

Welwitschia mirabilis grows in isolated communities in the Namib Desert in central Namibia to southern Angola. The plants are seldom found far from the coast, and the distribution coincides with the fog belt. *Welwitschia* is still somewhat common in its habitat and shows variability, a sign that the species is not near extinction. Although the plant is not endangered, it is protected by law. Rainfall in *Welwitschia*'s natural habitat is erratic and extremely low; often, there are years with no rainfall at all. *Welwitschia* is ecologically highly specialized and is adapted to grow under these arid conditions in areas that receive regular fog. *Welwitschia* leaves are formed so that it waters its own roots by collecting condensation, and the leaf surfaces have numerous stomata (microscopic pores) through which condensation is absorbed. *Welwitschia* also has a long taproot, allowing it to reach water deep underground. Antelope and rhinoceros chew *Welwitschia* leaves for hydration during times of drought. The cone of the female plant was used as food for people in earlier times; it was eaten raw or baked in hot ashes. The plant's common name is onyanga, which means "onion of the desert."

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