



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, which 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 it is 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 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 through fog condensation, and the leaf surfaces have numerous stomata (microscopic pores) through which condensation is absorbed. *Welwitschia* also has a long taproot that goes deep underground. Antelope and rhinoceros chew *Welwitschia* leaves for hydration during times of drought. The cone of the female plant was used as a vegetable 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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