



## 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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