

Cabbage Tree

cussonia paniculata

During one of the storms in November-December a large branch was broken from a Cabbage tree in the Waite Arboretum. The unusual patterns on the bark created some interest and I collected some to investigate it further.

Cabbage Tree is a short, thick-set tree, rarely exceeding five metres in height. It is sparsely branched with grey, fissured, thick and corky bark. These branches are covered with large leaf scars. When I prodded into the end grain of a 60mm dia. branch I was surprised by the texture of the 'wood'. It looked and felt like old leathery potato. Within a month it had dried and disappeared leaving a hollow branch - the bark has retained its integrity.



The largest section of the branch was about 200mm dia. and the pith about 45mm in diameter. Even with the large branch, the pith has dried and rotted away leaving a large hollow section.



Technically, this plant is considered a *pachycaul* succulent. *Pachycauls* are trees or plants, with particularly thick-stemmed trunks and often bottle-shaped. They are usually sparingly branched or have no branches and succulent, with a massive parenchymatous pith and relatively little secondary wood. This group of plants loosely includes Cacti and Boababs and other succulents.

The wood of Cabbage tree is soft and light and was used for the brake-blocks of wagons. The leaves provide good fodder for stock and the Zulu name refers to this tree as goats' food. The thick root can be peeled and eaten raw as food or as a source of water. It is one of the



favourite foods for elephants.

One of the species of Cabbage Tree, *cussonia spicata* is called Elephants toothbrush.

Cussonia was named to commemorate the French botanist Pierre Cusson (1727-1783). The specific name refers to the panicle or branched inflorescence. The genus has about 25 species of which about eight occur in South Africa. The remainder are found throughout tropical and southern Africa, Madagascar and the Comoro Islands.

This evergreen tree makes a beautiful focal point in a garden as it has an unusual shape, interesting gnarled bark and stunning, large, grey-green leaves.

The fruit are also interesting and resemble the fruit of the Monstera.



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