

eden project

PRESS RELEASE

Critically endangered palm becomes rarest plant in Eden Project's rainforest

- The palm is an example of a new species discovered in 2006

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An example of an extremely rare species of palm, only discovered in 2006, has found a new permanent home in the Eden Project's Rainforest Biome in Cornwall, ready for visitors to see this October half-term.

The palm, known as *Tahina spectabilis*, is native to the Analalava district - a very small, remote region in north-western Madagascar. The area is less than 5 hectares in size, or approximately three times the size of the attraction's Biome. It is listed as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List.

It is thought that there are fewer than 40 mature plants growing in the wild and a very small number in cultivation including in places such as Thailand, Costa Rica, Brazil, Venezuela and Mexico.

Having been discovered in late 2006, the new species to science was officially described in 2008 after photographs were sent to Kew Gardens and their scientists made a trip to Madagascar to identify it. The distinctiveness of this rare palm meant that a new, unique plant genus - a category normally grouping similar plants together - was created just for this single species.

The palm, which is now the rarest plant in the Eden Project's Rainforest Biome, had previously been grown at Cambridge University Botanic Garden, but needed to be relocated due to its size. The Garden donated the Plant to the Eden Project as part of the charity's ongoing conservation efforts.

Tahina spectabilis is the largest palm species from Madagascar and can be picked up on satellite imagery. Its trunk is capable of growing up to 18 metres in height, with leaves reaching up to 5 metres in diameter.

The example seen at the Eden Project is currently approximately 4 metres tall and is thought to be up to 17 years old. Whilst little is still known to science about the palm, it is thought it will take a further 30 to 50 years to reach its full size.

The palm is monocarpic, meaning that the plant flowers and sets seeds just once before it dies. During this flowering event, the plant uses an incredible amount of energy to produce an impressive inflorescence with a vast number of small flowers. This behaviour is often seen in *Agaves* but rarely in palms.

The inflorescence is a pyramid-shaped panicle that can grow 4-5 metres above the crown of the palm and consists of hundreds of three-flowered clusters. These clusters bloom in three consecutive, synchronised cohorts, attracting insects and birds for pollination.

The example at the Eden Project can be seen in the Tropical Islands area of the Rainforest Biome, where the team have created a special bed to support the palm to grow to its full size.

Catherine Cutler, the Eden Project's interim head of horticulture, said: "As horticulturists we are delighted that the Rainforest Biome is the new home for this magnificent palm, that we can play our part in the conservation of such an endangered species and that we, along with our visitors, can watch, and learn from it, as it grows.

"We are extremely proud of the collection of plants we have in the Biome, which sits at over 1,000 species and the eclectic stories they tell. There is so much for visitors to discover here and we are thrilled that this will offer another opportunity for them to experience a remarkable species that they wouldn't normally have the opportunity to enjoy."

Luigi Leoni, Cambridge University Botanic Garden's glasshouse team leader, said: "It's really exciting for the *Tahina* palm to be able to reach its full size at the Eden Project - something that wouldn't have been possible in our Glasshouses at Cambridge University Botanic Garden.

"This will probably allow for this critically endangered species to flower and produce seeds in a few decades' time. This will definitely be a first, since this Madagascan species was only described in 2008 and introduced to cultivation later on."

Alongside the palm being planted for visitors to see in the Rainforest Biome, there will be a plethora of things to enjoy at the Eden Project this October half-term.

The Eden Project's Halloweden season will be taking place from October 26 and November 3 and will include activities that will take visitors on a deep dive into the

extraordinary world of creepy crawlies great and small, including magnificent minibeast shows, a mega-beast safari and a marvellous bug fair.

Alongside the Halloweden programme, October half-term also sees the return of the Eden Project's popular ice rink.

For more information on what to see in the Eden Project's Rainforest Biome visit: www.edenproject.com.

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About the Eden Project

The Eden Project demonstrates and inspire positive action for the planet. As a growing movement of global citizens, we reconnect people with nature, we demonstrate and communicate positive change, and we inspire advocates of action.

For more information see www.edenproject.com.

About Cambridge University Botanic Garden

Supporting leading scientific research and welcoming over 350,000 visitors a year, Cambridge University Botanic Garden is one of the largest University-owned botanic gardens in the world. The Garden's living plant collection of over 8,000 species is spread across 40 acres of landscaped gardens. The collection, which includes iconic and endangered trees and plants, supports University research towards meeting many of the world's greatest future challenges (such as food security, climate change and medicine). The Garden also inspires schools, the local community and visitors from around the world about the importance of plants and plant science, horticulture and the joy of gardening.