

Befriend a

Monkey Puzzle Tree

In the Astley Ainslie



Do you want to be able to continue walking with trees in the Astley Ainslie, the most complete Victorian urban landscape in South Edinburgh where there are 1700 trees with 60 different species, and several of them are over 100 years old?

Well if you care, get involved. And one way to do that is to befriend a tree. Choose your own special tree in the Astley Ainslie and keep an eye on it. You will enjoy learning more about trees, and also increase the chances that your tree won't be cut down when the NHS leaves the site. It would be great if generations to come can enjoy the trees in the Astley Ainslie.

ASTLEY AINSLIE
ACT
COMMUNITY TRUST

Astley Ainslie Community Trust
Walking with Trees events

Suggestions for looking out for your tree

Make friends with a tree and rediscover our natural connection. Choose a tree, spend time observing and thinking about it, and document how it changes during the seasons. Come back and visit it over and over again to see what it is like at different times of the year, in the rain or a gale as well as in the sunshine. You can be factual or fantastic – what is it like to be a tree?

- Start a notebook, journal or scrapbook
- Draw or paint it, or make a rubbing of its bark
- Write a poem or sing a song about it

When does it bud? When does it break into leaf, flower, and develop seeds? When do the nuts drop from your tree and when do its leaves change colour and finally drop to the ground, forming a deep carpet beneath the tree? You could also think about:

- When was it planted, and was it connected with any historical events?
- What is its height and spread, and its girth (the diameter of its trunk)
- What birds, mammals and insects does it support?
- Does it look healthy?

Engage with your tree. Check out Peter Wohlleben's¹ book – find out what dramas are being played out around your tree, and what its social network is.

- Slow down, breathe deep, and look around
- What can you hear? What do you see? How do you feel?

Record any information you want. These are just suggestions. Our knowledge and experience of nature is now slender. We need to recreate the understanding that we are only a part of nature, and wholly dependent upon it for our lives, health and well-being, and even our survival.

Visit our website at: <https://aact.scot>

Go to our website for information and suggestions for tree befriending, including links to other useful websites, TED talks, apps, books, and how to share information about trees.

¹ Wohlleben, P. (2015). The Hidden Life of Trees. What they feel, how they communicate.

Some anecdotes about the monkey puzzle tree

The araucaria seeds were so important as food to the Araucanian peoples of Chile, that the tree is formally named after them, and it is now the national tree of Chile. It was brought to Britain in the late eighteenth century, when Archibald Menzies (born in Perthshire in 1754) discovered the seeds on the dinner table of the Governor of Chile in Santiago. He pocketed some to bring back and grow. It was given its common name in the mid nineteenth century, when a Cornish landowner was proudly showing his tree to guests, and one remarked: 'It would puzzle a monkey to climb that!'

Although this is evidently an imported tree, it might be claimed as native in prehistoric times. Whitby jet, used for making black jewellery, is thought to be the fossil remains of a monkey puzzle tree. In 2013, it was declared an endangered species in its native lands in Chile and Argentina.

The tree is one of the world's oldest plants and can live to a thousand years or more. The trees are male or female, so both are required for pollination. In the English west country and the west of Scotland, it has produced good seeds, which taste like cashew nuts, and, theoretically, could provide a useful crop in Scotland. The problem, in commercial terms, is that it only produces seeds after 50 years.



In Chile, the seeds are mostly dispersed by the long-haired grass mouse, which buries them in good positions. In Britain, people mostly stand in for the mouse in planting the trees.

The one growing in the Astley Ainslie grounds was planted in the garden of St Roque, to the west of the house, and is embedded in undergrowth. The resin can be used in the treatment of ulcers and wounds.

The monkey puzzle tree

An evergreen tree, it keeps its leaves all year round. Native to central and southern Chile and western Argentina, it was introduced to the UK during the Victorian era. It is common in gardens throughout Britain and flourishes in the damper air of the west.

Common name: Monkey puzzle/Chile pine **Scientific name:** *Araucaria araucana*

Overview: The monkey puzzle has a very distinct appearance. Reaching up to 30 m in height, it has a stout, almost cylindrical bole with a purplish-brown smooth bark. Sometimes the base of a large tree can resemble an elephant's foot. It likes well drained, lightly acidic soil. It is generally tolerant but dislikes atmospheric pollution.

Leaves: Long, flexible arms of triangular spiky leaves which can last individually for more than 24 years. The leaves are green and leathery. They are arranged in a spiral around the trunk and are broad at the base and sharp at the edges and tips.

Flowers: Male and female flowers grow on separate trees. Male catkins are a 10 cm long cluster of narrow green stamens and appear after 150 years of growth. Female catkins are spiny cones and appear after 50 years of growth.

Fruits: Cones are green with gold and hair-like edges. They grow at the tips of the branches, ripen over two or three years and eventually turn brown and release large brown seeds.

Value to wildlife: In its native South America, it is home to the slender-billed parakeet and over 70 species of endemic insects. In the UK monkey puzzles are planted as ornamental trees although the seeds are edible and delicious when toasted.

Threats: Due to heavy logging in Chile the trees have been categorised as 'endangered' on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Global Red List, meaning it is illegal to cut down a wild monkey puzzle.



Leaf, female catkin, and seed (nut)