

## Dioscorea elephantipes – Elephant's Foot

*Dioscorea elephantipes*, commonly known as Elephant's Foot, is a very beautiful caudiciform plant from South Africa that is often described as weird and wonderful. The beauty of *Dioscorea elephantipes* lies in its much divided, deeply fissured above-ground caudex said to resemble an elephant's foot and which in some cases can in time grow to as much as 3m in height with the tuber reaching 90cm in diameter.

*Dioscorea elephantipes* is a perennial geophytic climber that is summer deciduous. It is used to extreme heat (above 40°C), but it can also take low temperatures (-4°C). The plant is adapted to growing in areas with seasonal rainfall, by going dormant in the dry season. The above ground caudex is protected by elephantine bark while it rests. During the cooler months of winter and spring it produces foliage and flowers, but in summer the plant conserves energy by dropping its leaves just before the onset of the summer heat.

These plants are monoecious, meaning that the flowering sexes are found on separate plants. The stems grow in a climbing fashion and the leaves are heart-shaped. The male flowers are erect with spiny racemes and female flowers are in spinescent, spreading spikes. Flowers are pale greenish yellow and normally appear in May or June (in the southern hemisphere). Seed is produced in September and October.

It is believed the Khoisan used to bake the starchy, bread-like trunk which was used as a food source. Other members in the genus *Dioscorea* are used to extract steroidal saponins which are used to produce cortisone and and contraceptives. Many of the South African species have been over-harvested for testing purposes.

The plant appears to have a wide tolerance of growing habitats, growing in weathered rock, on dry, stony slopes, under the protection of karroid bushes. The plant's caudex (short, thick stem) can reach heights of 3m in ideal conditions.

*Dioscorea elephantipes* will live for about 70 years in cultivation if it is looked after. Do not over-water during the summer months, as this will shorten its life span by at least half. In its natural environment it rests during the hot dry summer, and this is replicated even when cultivated in much more favourable growing conditions.

### Propagation

*Dioscorea* seeds are a large winged seed generally spread and distributed by the wind.

Sow seed into a fine well-drained potting mix suitable for succulents and cacti.

Seed should be covered lightly with more potting mix to about 2 times their diameter, so they are not visible anymore. Water in well with a fine spray or mist until all the mix is moist.

Move seed tray to a warm sheltered position with about 50% light and keep the tray moist (but not wet) until germination occurs.

Although seeds will often germinate various times of the year but for best results sow in late summer/autumn and spring.

To aid germination the seed tray or pot can be covered with glass to help retain moisture but still let in light.

To reduce the risk of fungi or other pathogens the potting mix drenched with a suitable fungicide for root rots prior to seed sowing.

