

BRIGHAMIA INSIGNIS

By Sue Haffner



Photograph from The Nature Conservancy

“Cabbage on a stick” is one moniker used for the intriguing Hawaiian native pachycaul Brighamia insignis. It has also been called “Cabbage on a bowling pin or an “Aeonium on steroids”. Once a fairly common plant on several of the islands, it is now critically endangered and is found only on the steep, rugged Napali cliffs on Kauai. Recent surveys have found as few as 7 or 8 mature specimens per population in the several habitats.

B. insignis and the other species in the genus, B. rockii, (found only on Molokai) have thick, succulent stems that are swollen at the rounded base, tapering toward the apex and crowned by a dense rosette of fleshy green leaves. While the stem is usually solitary, multi-stemmed specimens have been reported. The smooth trunks are thin-skinned and typically grow to a height of between 1 and 2 ½ meters in habitat. The main difference between the two species, besides habitat, is in flower color. B. insignis has creamy white to light yellow blooms, while B. rockii has white flowers. Its trunk is also distinctly purple colored.

The “Cabbage on a stick” was first described in 1867 and named for W.T. Brigham, the first director of the Bernice P. Bishop Museum in Honolulu. The specific name insignis, is Latin for ‘remarkable’, ‘distinctive’ or ‘unusual’ - terms that certainly describe it.

Indigenous people have various uses for the plants, including as a horn (after the trunk had been hollowed out); and medicinal uses. Raw parts of the plant were eaten as a treatment for consumption and other disorders, and the leaves were crushed and mixed with sea salt and used to treat cuts and infections.

The causes of the near demise of *Brighamia* are varied. Feral goats and pigs have contributed to the degradation of its habitat; introduced vegetation has out-competed it for resources; fire and human disturbance have taken their toll. Weather is also a factor. On September 11, 1992, Hurricane Iniki slammed into Kauai with winds measured at over 320 km per hour – before the anemometer was snapped off and blown away. Needless to say, some *Brighamias* blew away with it. Another contributing factor is the apparent loss of its natural pollinator, a long-tongued hawkmoth. Until 1996 it was thought extinct, when several adult moths were found on Kauai. As if that isn't enough, the species suffers from 'inbreeding depression'. This loss of genetic variability results from their being too few mature specimens remaining and not enough natural pollen exchange to produce healthy offspring.

Thanks to the National Tropical Botanical Garden on Kauai, which has a program of pollinating habitat plants, *Brighamia* seeds and plants have been distributed around the world. They have been available in commerce for some time.

It seems somehow ironic that a plant so endangered in habitat is fairly easy to grow in cultivation. In our area, it needs protection from the full sun, as the trunk is easily burned. In habitat the temperature rarely exceeds 80 or drops below 40 degrees. Humidity is high and breezes constantly move the air. Mist the plant to maintain humidity. Don't let it get completely dried out, as that can damage the roots. Red spider mite is the chief pest of *Brighamias*, but the misting can help deter these bugs.