

THE BUTTER TREE

“Butter Tree” (“Botterboom” in Afrikaans) is the vernacular name for *Tylecodon paniculatus*, in reference to the plant’s soft juicy stem. It is the largest and most impressive of all the *Tylecodon*s, one of about 50 species endemic to the semi-arid and winter rainfall areas of South Africa where it grows in a wide variety of habitats.

Plants are usually single-stemmed, thick-set, deciduous dwarf trees up to 2.5 or 3 meters tall. The stem is densely branched above, with a rounded crown. The branches are softly succulent, green with a yellow, semi-transparent peeling bark. The species has a paniculate inflorescence of tubular red flowers which appears during late spring (October to January in the southern hemisphere) when the plants are leafless.

Tylecodon paniculatus has long been known in botanical literature. For many years it was called *Cotyledon paniculata*. In 1978 the botanist H.R.Tölken divided *Cotyledon*, separating out those species with alternate leaf arrangements and a deciduous habit. These he placed in a new genus, *Tylecodon* (an anagram of *Cotyledon*).

Last year Ernst van Jaarsveld described a new subspecies, *Tylecodon paniculatus* ssp *glaucus*, found in southern Namibia and the northern Richtersveld. It has slender grayish-green stems with conspicuous leaf scars and gray peeling bark and narrow glaucous linear-obovate leaves.

Culture of the “Butter Tree” is fairly simple. Keep it dry in summer; begin watering when you see growth beginning in the fall. Dappled shade is recommended, as the stems need to be protected against sunburn. Propagation is easy from cuttings. The plant seems to tolerate cold temperatures fairly well. You see large specimens in the ground down in southern California, but it might not be wise to plant them in the ground in our area—unless you have an especially protected area



(Illus. From: Van Jaarsveld, E.J. & Koutnik, D. 2004. “*Cotyledon* and *Tylecodon*.”)