

Fig. 1. Dragon trees (species *Dracaena draco*) in Tenerife, an island in the Canary Islands archipelago.



THE DRAGON TREE OF TENERIFE

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The tree of the temptation

THE DRAGON trees (*Dracaena draco*) of Spain's Canary Islands (fig. 1) are very long-lived. When cut or bruised, they exude a deep red sap. It dries into a dark red resin (fig. 2) which has historically been used as a valuable medicine, dye, and pigment.¹ It was even used to colour varnishes for the famous Stradivarius violins.

The red sap was known as 'dragon's blood' in ancient times. It was later linked to Ladon, the serpent-like dragon of Greek mythology guarding the tree of golden apples. Subsequent European embellishments led to the idea that the tree sprang from the blood of the dragon seeping into the

ground after it was slain by Hercules. The Ladon myth may well have been a corruption of the historical reality in Genesis. Not surprisingly, perhaps, in later European times, the dragon tree was sometimes said to be the tree of Adam and Eve's temptation by the serpent. This motif became established in some European art.²

The genus name *Dracaena* is from the ancient Greek *drakaina*, δράκαινα = 'she-dragon'. The species name *draco* is Latin for 'dragon'. *Dracaena* is actually an amazingly diverse genus, going well beyond various species of dragon trees. It consists of over 200 species of trees, shrubs, and succulents, some of them popular with home gardeners. These include the well-known snake plants (fig. 3), all recently reclassified from another genus.

As well as the Canary Islands and several of the neighbouring archipelagos such as Madeira, *Dracaena* trees are known from the Middle East, for example in Yemen as *Dracaena cinnabari* (the Socotra dragon tree, fig. 4). This is probably the one from which the resin was first known. They are also known in North Africa, where a population of *D. draco* is native to Morocco.

The explorer and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (fig. 5) visited an ancient dragon tree (fig. 6) around 1799. It was located in a private garden in the town of La



Fig. 2. The dried sap (resin) from *Dracaena cinnabari* (fig. 4) was the likely source of the original trade in 'dragon's blood', a valuable pigment/dye later also sourced from *D. draco*.

Fig. 3. The succulent *Dracaena* (formerly *Sansevieria*) *trifasciata*, possibly the world's most common house plant and one of 70+ species of snake plant.

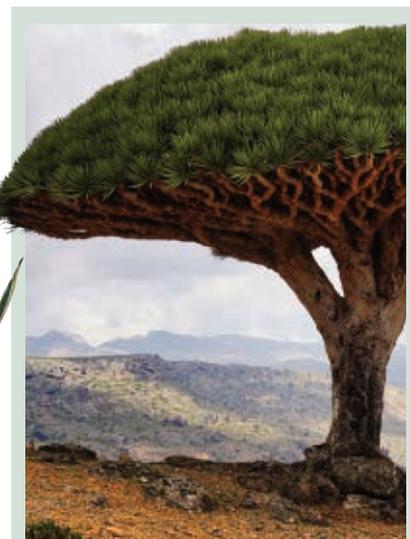


Fig. 4. The Socotra dragon tree, *Dracaena cinnabari*, in its native Yemen.

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Orotava, in Tenerife's central north. The tree was estimated to be 15–18 m (50–60 ft) high. Its circumference near the base was measured at 45 feet (about 14 m), and the circumference of its dense canopy would have been about five to six times greater.

The indigenous people (Guanaches) had long used the tree's huge shelter as a sacred and obvious place to gather for worship and for matters of tribal government, the administration of justice, and settling disputes.

Humboldt considered that, along with the baobab tree of Senegal, it was “one of the oldest inhabitants of our globe.”³ Undoubtedly, he thought it was thousands of years old.⁴

Alas, no more

The tree was damaged by a storm in 1819, leaving only five branches. The biologist Ernst Haeckel, later to become infamous for fraud to promote evolution,⁵ visited the tree in 1866, suggesting the species “lives for thousands of years.”⁶ Ironically, the tree was completely felled in a gale just one year later, in 1867.⁷

The oldest and largest dragon tree in the world today is the El Drago Milenario tree in Icod de los Vinos municipality in Tenerife's northwest (fig. 7). It has a large cavity in the middle, and is the most famous tree on the island. It is often used as an emblem of Tenerife and pictured on the coat of arms of its municipality.

From a seedling, the dragon tree grows to a height of several metres over 10 to 15 years, then flowers, after which it branches, grows for a similar period, then flowers and branches again. This activity forms an umbrella-shaped tree, while the trunk expands and becomes hollow inside. So, dating from tree rings becomes impossible. As the tree grows in age the period of flowering becomes more

erratic, thus counting back the number of branch divisions leads to a wide spread of estimates.

Estimates of the age of the El Drago Milenario tree vary from about 365 years in 1975 (415 years to 2025),⁸ to 2,000 years based on “measurement-evolution of stem roots”—it is generally considered to be around 800 to 1,000 years old.⁹ Dating of this tree highlights just how diverse scientific opinion can be on the age of things, and highlights the uncertainty of the various methods. This is just one example of the sorts of problems inherent in many attempts to date things in the absence of written records. ■

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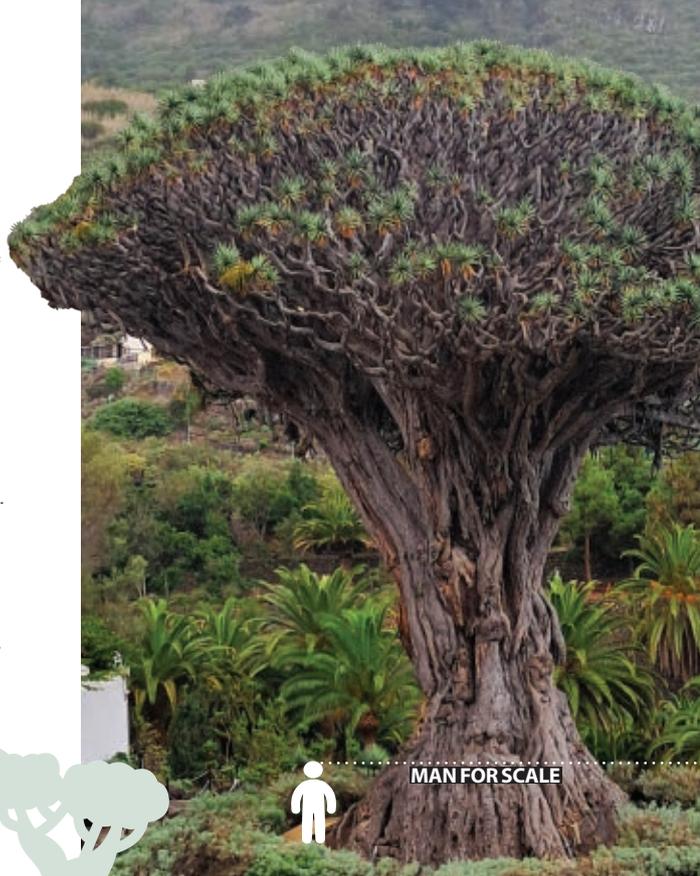


Fig. 6. The huge dragon tree at Orotava, visited by Humboldt in 1799, no longer exists.



Fig. 5. Famous explorer and polymath Alexander von Humboldt (French; Alexandre de Humboldt).

Fig. 7. El Drago Milenario (‘The thousand-year-old dragon tree’), the largest alive today, at Icod de los Vinos, Tenerife.



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