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A huge Welwitschia

[The Most Grotesque Plant on Earth](#)

Welwitschia mirabilis

This plant seems to be born from the imagination of the science fiction movie makers. *Welwitschia mirabilis* is just a snag with only two leaves and it has been called officially the most hideous plant on Earth at Chelsea Flower Show. This plant grows just on the dunes of Namibia's and Angola's Skeleton Coast, in the middle of one of the most arid and barren deserts on Earth. Even so, the plant is fast disappearing from the great Namib Desert (southwestern Africa). *Welwitschia* also gets relatively little attention from conservationists, despite the fact of being a living fossil, from the time when Earth was covered just by ferns and gymnosperms during the Jurassic era. The plant is certainly the most awful mess to look at, but it is indeed a gymnosperm, like all coniferous trees. Despite producing just two leaves, each one can be up to 4 m (12 ft) long. The enormous green fronds (leaves) coil out and around each other like diseased dragons' tongues, forming a mass of cactus-like projections, ending in a sunbleached gray frizzle. The whole plant can be 13 ft (4 m) wide and 5ft (1.5 m) tall, with roots going down another 6ft (1.8 ft). Female red-crimson cones or male white cones grow in clusters in the middle of *Welwitschia* and the individuals are males or females (the plant is dioecious). The plant's weapon against potential interested herbivorous is its poison, which however cannot deter the black rhino. The poisonous labyrinth of leaves forms the habitat for a weevil species, *Odontopus sexpunctatus*, totally dependent on the plant and ensuring its pollination. The weevil's larvae are red; the adults are tawny with black spots. But the most astonishing trait of *Welwitschia* is its longevity: it can overcome 2,000 years, being one of the most long-lived organism on Earth: when Christianity arose many of the biggest *Welwitschia* were kicking around in Namibia. The name *Welwitschia* is in honor of an Austrian explorer, Friedrich Welwitsch, which first spotted the plant in 1859, while *mirabilis* points to the plant's unique traits. It does share a kinship with two gymnosperm families, one being that of the joint-pine, but remotely. Scientists believe *Welwitschia* resisted from Jurassic till now because it did not experience competition with the evolved flower plants in the harsh settings of the Namib Desert - one of the oldest, driest and most severe in the planet (several years can pass without a single rain droplet and ground temperatures reach 65 °C during summer). Gymnosperms are generally resistant to drought, but *Welwitschia*'s secret is linked to the fogs that constantly wrap the region. The cold water of the Benguela sea current on the coasts of the Namib Desert hit the hot and dry desert air producing vast, soggy low level clouds. The hideous sinister leaves serve exactly for this: sucking the dew left by the fog.