

Dragon Trees

by Sydney J. Tanner, Chippewa Valley Master Gardener



When my husband and I took full time care of my sweet, little mother-in-law, it included taking care of her home, garden, and houseplants. After she passed away (at age 104), I “inherited” her houseplants. One of the interesting plants that now graces my kitchen window sill is Phoebe’s dragon tree.

Dracaena marginata is a broadleaf evergreen that (in this country) is usually grown as a house plant. It is native to Madagascar and Mauritius and does well outside, in zones 10-12. They can grow up to seventy feet tall with a canopy of ten feet, in the out of doors. However, as a house plant the top height is six to eight feet tall. In some areas, they are also called dragon plants and/or rainbow trees.

The trunk (or cane) of the tree is interesting to look at. They can be knobby, gnarly, twisted, or look etched. This is part of the tree’s charm and is desirable. The leaves are slender, sword-shaped, and arch from the cane. Dragon trees that are house plants rarely flower. Out of doors, the blossoms are white and only appear once every 8-10 years.



Dragon trees are labeled “easy” to grow and care for. They make good “first” houseplants because they don’t mind being forgotten every once in a while. They are long-lived, attractive, and make good gifts for home or office. Make sure you select healthy plants. If you can, check the plant and soil for pests. At present, a small, four-inch potted dragon tree costs anywhere from \$6 to \$30.

The tree does well in bright light, but tolerates shade and lower light situations. Temperature-wise, dragon trees enjoy the same room temps as people. They don’t like too cold (under 60 degrees) or too hot (over 85 degrees). Dragon trees like well composted soil or a good potting mix. They prefer the soil slightly acidic (pH 6.0 to 6.5) and do not need fertilizer.

I know you’re probably wondering where the term “dragon tree” came from. *Dracaena* is a Greek word meaning female dragon, and has its origins in Greek myth. The basics of the story is that a beast named Landon was a one hundred headed dragon. The dragon was sent by Hera to guard the sacred apples in the Garden of Hesperides. Hercules (with lots of goings on) ended up slaying Landon. Every place a drop of the dragon’s blood fell, a dragon tree sprung up. Landon was made into the constellation Draco, and the dragon tree still “bleeds.” Actually, the dark, red-tinged resin that drips if the plant is injured, is startling and is called dragon’s blood. Don’t cut your dragon tree just to see it!

The family Dracaenaceae has over 160 species of tropical trees in it. While we are focusing on dragon trees, there are related species called *Dracaena reflexata* and *Dracaena fragrans*, which are different subjects, but also make fine house plants.

There are several varieties of dragon trees. For the purpose of this article, I’ll describe three of them. All three are available in this area. The basic *Dracaena marginata* has dark green leaves, with dark red leaf margins. The tri-color has green leaves with dark red margins, and

an off-white stripe that runs down the center of the leaf. The bi-color has red and green stripes down the leaves.

Dragon trees can be propagated from seed or with cuttings. Dragon tree seeds should be sown in well drained potting mix, in the spring. The seeds can be expensive-- at present, up to \$3 each. The seeds will germinate in four to six weeks (sometimes longer). When there are at least two "true" leaves, replot the little seedlings into their own three-inch pots. To make cuttings, clean a section of cut branch or trunk, removing any stray branches. Cut (with hand pruning tool) the section into 3-4 inch pieces, making sure there are stubs (nodes or little bumps) on each piece. Plant each cut piece length-wise into well drained soil. Cover with about an inch of soil. Place in a well-lit, warm place and water. Leave them undisturbed until they root.

Dragon trees do not need a lot of water. In fact, one problem is that they usually get watered too much. When I over water, the dragon tree leaves start to fall off. (As a note, the bottom-most leaves also fall off naturally when the tree is actively growing.) Allow the soil in the pot to dry out before watering again. If you are a "mister," only mist the tree every few weeks. In winter time, dragon trees need even less water than "normal."

Do not keep your dragon tree where your cat or dog may "get into" it. Dragon trees are on several poisonous house plant lists. Studies at the University of Connecticut have proven that the plant is "generally" nontoxic to people including children, but does in fact poison cats and some dogs.

This does not mean you shouldn't have a dragon tree. Studies done by NASA show that Dragon trees clean the air of toxins and VOCs (volatile organic compounds) like xylene, benzene, formaldehyde, some heavy metals, and trichloroethylene. Combined with other house plants, dragon trees make your home or office environment healthier.

It takes between seven to ten years before your indoor dragon tree will reach a height of 2-3 feet. The trees have a long-life line, maturing at age 30. An eight-foot tall, indoor dragon tree is to be respected, indeed! The reality is, that the life of a dragon tree can span more than three centuries. There is a very famous dragon tree in the Canary Islands that has become a sacred icon. It's called "El Drago Milenario." The name means "thousand-year-old dragon," but the tree is about half that old. People actually make pilgrimages to see it.

Even though growth is very slow, dragon trees should be repotted every two years so they don't become root bound. Dragon trees are known for "thriving" on neglect. However, if they get too root bound, the tree will start to wilt. Repotting should be done in the spring. Choose a pot just a little larger than the pot the plant was in. Take good care of your dragon tree and you'll have an heirloom.