

This tree is a corker, but is it Australia's biggest?

ERIC PARNIS 20 Jan, 2010 10:39 AM

A cork tree sits in the grounds of St Mary's Anglican Church in the east-Melbourne suburb of Caulfield. It is 106 years old, 21 metres high and, according to the National Register of Big Trees, just big enough to beat Tenterfield's entrant for the title of Australia's biggest cork tree.

The sign marking the famous cork tree on Wood Street says that the 149-year-old tree is believed to be Australia's largest. But it is a label that may now have to be shared with the Caulfield tree if measurements are correct, said Derek McIntosh, founder of the National Register of Big Trees.

"I'm sure Tenterfield wants to hear that it has the biggest cork tree, but as far as I'm concerned, it's a joint championship," he said.

"Though I have asked the man in Caulfield to re-measure, so who knows?"

The National Register of Big Trees lists Australian trees, both indigenous and foreign, and measures them with a point system on the basis of a formula that includes trunk girth, the tree's height and crown spread.

It is a measure used for more than four decades by the American Forests Register of Big Trees and one that Mr McIntosh, a South African expatriate, adopted for Australia.

"Clearly, comparing the biggest apple tree with Tasmania's biggest pines would not work. This system can allow us to compare apples with apples," he explained. "If you can excuse the pun."

According to the scale Tenterfield's cork tree comes in agonisingly close to Caulfield's, with only one point separating them at 281 and 282 points.

In cases like this, and with any trees of the same variety that come within five per cent of each other, Mr McIntosh said the championship would have to be shared.

But as trees grow and new trees are measured, championships change or come under threat and it is this that keeps Mr McIntosh passionate.

"I love trees and trying to find the biggest tree of every species. It's just a hell of a lot of fun," he said.

And it is fun that Mr McIntosh wants more people to become involved in.

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