

## KENYA FLOWERS AS GARDEN PLANTS.

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When Miss Napier and I were asked to write a paper on some aspects of the Kenya Flora we both agreed that the "Aspect" which should have the widest appeal would be the suitability of Native plants for garden cultivation, and a few days later I heard of a gardener who was very indignant because his local Plant Nurseryman had sold him, as a flowering shrub, a Clerodendron which had turned out to be "a beastly wild thing which grows in the bush!" and I smiled when I remembered that the last time I was in England I had seen a very many specimen of this same blue clerodendron, growing in a pot, and exhibited at a R.H.S. show in Vincent Square as a very special treasure.

One has to remember I think, that all garden plants grown in England were originally wild flowers somewhere, or were evolved from wild flowers in the past; that expeditions are continually going to China and such places to collect further new wild flowers to bring back for cultivation in England; the only reason they do not come here is because our flora, not being hardy, is only suitable to hot houses in England, and in these economical days very few people can afford to grow tropical plants.

Now many of our indigenous plants are things of very real beauty, and are worthy of good places in any garden; and some have the added value of flowering when most imported plants are drooping sadly and making no show. Yet so odd is the mind of the general public (with apologies to the wiser minority!) that while nearly every one will show you with pride a sad little plant of an English Primrose, with one miserable flower, they will also turn away from a well grown group of flaunting scarlet and yellow Gloriosas remarking, "but those are only weeds aren't they?" Nothing as beautiful as a Gloriosa could be a weed. A wild flower out here, yes, but a much sought after green house plant in England, costing half a crown a tuber at least!

### FLOWERING TREES:

I cannot attempt to tell you of all the plants worth growing, but I would like to mention a few of the better ones, and among flowering trees the first which occurs to me is *Spathodea nilotica*, or the Nandi flame tree. I have a suspicion that not many people realise that this is an indigenous tree, as it is so widely planted; and it is so well known, with its great orange scarlet cups, that it really needs no further recommendation from me.

Another exceedingly handsome tree is *Cordia Holstii*, known to the Kikuyu as Muringa. It has the advantage of being very quick growing, with large heart-shaped leaves which get smaller on the older trees, and when in flower is completely smothered with trusses of papery white flowers. If the lower branches are kept cut it grows up with amazing rapidity, into a fine shaped specimen tree and, having a wide spread, would be a good shady tree for a lawn.

Smaller trees, and slower growers, are the Ochna family with pretty foliage and wood rather like a wild cherry, masses of sweetly scented yellow flowers (folk call it the Primrose tree) and curious fruits, or seeds, blue black on a persistent calyx which turns deep red, so that the season of colour is very much prolonged. Branches cut for the house drop every petal in the evening and produce a new crop of flowers each morning for several days.

*Millettia oblata* is a small deciduous tree which is much in evidence on the Nyeri Road, with its panicles of mauve pea flowers, rather like a tree Wistaria. It flowers quite freely and quite quickly and is always admired; while in the districts which suit it, and round Thika and down into the Akamba country the *Dombeya umbraculifera* makes the country side look like a fruit orchard, so apple-like are the pink or white masses of blossom on the leafless little trees; but this tree, alas! is also very slow, and pretty particular as to where he grows.

The evergreen tree that used to be called *Randia*, which is now classed among the gardenias, is very well worth a place, for it seems to bear flowers most of the year, stiff upright bell shaped things, creamy white spotted with purple inside and intensely sweetly scented. They stand along the branches rather like candles on a Christmas tree.

Every one probably knows the so-called "Cape Chestnut" by sight, *Calodendron capense*, but it is surprising how few people have ever handled the blossoms, or realised the positively orchid like beauty of the details of those pinky mauve clusters. Cape chestnuts too require patience, as they do not flower for a sadly long time after planting; but they should certainly be planted for the benefit of our children, even if not for our own!

*Calpurnia aurea* is often alluded to as the sham laburnum, and a good description it is of this golden flowered tree which is fairly common in forest lands of the Mau and of Laikipia; while *Markhamia Hildebrandtii* is another worthy of a garden place, with dark green handsome pinnate leaves and panicles of large clear yellow trumpet flowers, like those of a Bignonia, to which family indeed the tree belongs. This tree is common from Nairobi to Meru, a true Kikuyu in fact.

*Erythrina tomentosa*, sometimes called, in imitation of the Dutch, the Kaffir boom, grows everywhere, and few things are lovelier than this tree in full bloom. It should be more planted, as in populated districts it is apt to be crowded out. Its red lobster-claw flowers are very very good, and what Kenya child has not delighted in picking up its red seeds, which they call "lucky beans?"

#### FLOWERING SHRUBS.

When one comes down the scale of height and looks at the flowering shrubs of the Colony, it is indeed hard to know where to stop, they are so many, and so good.

I think my favourite is perhaps *Carissa edulis*, that very cruelly spiny big shrub with clusters of deep red buds opening into jasmine like flowers, deliciously scented, and followed by red and purple fruits which, as its name tells you, are edible. It seems to grow all over the Colony, so should do anywhere; it is a bit slow from seed but flowers nearly all the year through.

The Blue Butterfly bush, *Clerodendron myricoides* every one knows also, and in its best forms it is very lovely, with flowers like clouds of blue butterflies all over the bush; while a handsome shrub is the white *Clerodendron Guerkei*, which is common beyond Lum̄bwa, and again round Kitale. It is really beautiful, but has the nasty habit of sending suckers all over the garden. Still, I think it is worth the trouble of weeding them out, for its masses of long tubed white flowers make such a fine show for so many months in the year.

The deep violet blue, yellow throated *Thunbergia affinis*, from the Akamba country is another treasure which everyone should grow, the flowers being large and brilliant out of all proportion to the size of the shrub; and the paler, soft mauve blue *Dyschoriste Thunbergiflora* which also comes from parts of the Akamba country is another very showy shrub with masses of its smaller trumpets for months at a time. It has flowered valiantly this dry year, which is much to its credit. All round Nairobi you can find two charming white flowered shrubs, *Turraea mombassiana*, with its neat close shining foliage and quite big, loose petalled white flowers, followed by scarlet seeds; and the taller looser growing Englerodaphne, a delicate graceful tall bush with masses of tiny sweet scented white flowers. The *Turraea* this spring was so white with flowers that several times it made my pony shy, as he came on it in the bush.

*Ruttya speciosa* is another favourite of mine from the dry slopes of the Kedong Valley. A scandent shrub, deciduous, and bearing showy and curious orange scarlet flowers with a black blotch on the lip of each like burnt sealing wax. This bush always attracts attention from visitors.

*Acokanthera longiflora*, the leaves and twigs of which are used by the Wakamba for poisoning arrows, is a handsome bush in foliage, scented white flowers, and red plum like fruits too, and is better for garden work than *A. schimperii*, a larger tree with smaller leaves and flowers. Both are common over a great part of the country, but none the less desirable for that!

Many of the Hypericums, or St. John's Worts are good garden shrubs and very free flowering with loose showers of golden bloom while the big pea family of *Crotalaria* gives many very handsome members for garden decoration. *C. agatiflora* with long spikes of pale greenish yellow flowers, *C. pseudospartium* of weeping habit with very small leaves and prominent big golden flowers, and *C. lachnocarpoides* which opens golden yellow and turns to a reddish bronze and has pods softly hairy and brown when ripe, like mice! are some of the best.

The Pentas's are useful too. *P. Carnea* which is common all round here and over most of Kenya, is very pretty, lilac mauve in colour, the scarlet *P. coccinea* is very good and really showy but the loveliest of all has so far refused garden life with me. *P. longituba* from Kitale to Kericho is really beautiful with large heads of pure white long tubed flowers on single stems with whorls of narrow leaves at intervals, the plant having the general appearance of some strange lily rather than a shrub.

There is a very charming little *Bauhinia taitensis*, with lemon yellow flowers which have a purple eye. It is a rather variable shrub, and seeds from the same source may give some almost prostrate spreading plants and others upright and nearly tree like with larger leaves, it is very rarely completely out of flower.

One must not leave out *Cassia didymobotrya*, frequent as it is, for though on the coarse side, it is undeniably handsome with great upright racemes of bright yellow flowers topped by the immature buds of darkest brown. Hibiscus certainly deserve mention for though most of the yellow flowered ones are too big and coarse for garden work nevertheless the little crimson fellow, *H. aponeurus* is very restrained and dainty, and a charming flower if you look closely at it, and with small neat foliage and no dangerous spreading habits, while the violet flowered *H. cannabinus* is one of the most distinctive flowers in Kenya. It varies in colour, perhaps according to soil, from the palest grey lilac to a deep violet, always maroon eyed and though not strictly a shrub as it is at most, I think, biennial, it grows over 5 foot in height and becomes quite woody in stem.

*Hibiscus gossipinus*, is the upright little bush, growing all over Kenya, with small pendant white flowers with the typical long brush

of stamens that all the Malvacea family carry, very pretty, perhaps rather a seeder, but easy enough to weed out when small.

While the nearly related *Abutilon zansibaricum* an upright larger shrub, handsomer in all respects though superficially very like Pavonia is more worthy of a place—and has the unusual habit of only opening fully in the afternoon, so as to suit the evening garden visitor—the Pavonia on the other hand closes soon after mid-day. Pavonia krausiana with yellow flowers, sometimes red eyed, and long straggly unbreakable branches, had better be avoided, it is far too all invading. I believe it is this plant that provides the string with which the Kikuyu women make their bags for carrying purposes.

I wonder how many people know *Tinnia aethiopica* a true charmer, but retiring by nature? Masses of maroon coloured flowers, faintly like a snapdragon in shape and in a hot sun very strongly scented of violets. It was called after that unfortunate Mademoiselle Tinné, who explored parts of the Nile earlier in the last century, and who was done to death by her porters, who believed she carried gold in the little water tanks that were always loaded on two camels.

There are wild shrubs nearly allied to the garden Lasiandra (whose correct name, by the way, is Tibouchina!) called Dissotis mostly growing by streams and fairly widely distributed, some of a rather nasty mauve colour but others very good violets and purples.

Asclepias is another family worth growing—tall willowy plants with interesting flowers in buff, yellow, white or mauve, and most attractive fat seed pods, in which hundreds of seeds, each with a silken flying apparatus are packed closely and beautifully round a central core—once open, and the seeds loosed, it is a marvel how they ever fitted in.

The Dracaenas are useful and tropical looking plants in the garden, both the large *D. fragrans* which grows all round Nairobi, in old forest land and on river banks, and the smaller rarer species from the Kedong Valley.

There are several attractive shrubby Ipomeas, and at least two are easy and ornamental. *I. Hildebrandtii* with large leaves and pale mauvy white flowers which one sees such a lot of on the road through Kajiado, and prettier though inclined to be straggly is *I. argyrophylla*, I believe from beyond Ngong, smaller in foliage and flowers but a far better colour, being a bright lilac.

This family is naturally largely composed of climbers and many of these are very lovely, such as *I. cairica* with delicate palmate leaves, though many are also too rampant for garden use. One big heavy species, but by no means uncontrollable, is *I. kituensis* with mauve flowers, which will very quickly make a dense screen to hide any part

of the garden from general view, and the little yellow *I. obscura* is tractable enough and very pretty for growing up a wire fence or pergola post.

We have several *Jasminums*, all with the correct family scent *J. Hildebrandtii* growing on the edges of forests or in light bush country is rather a ramper and roots wherever it touches the ground and prefers his toes in the shade and his head in the sun, while *J. Goetzeanum* fairly common round Nairobi among low scrub and rocks is smaller in all ways, very dainty in leaf and flower, very strongly scented and easier to control.

Perhaps the most brilliant climber we have is *Combretum paniculatum* which climbs to the tops of the tallest trees and makes a glorious display with its big flat cymes of vivid scarlet blossoms. Planted in the open and kept brutally cut back, as though eaten down by goats, it can be made to flower freely as a shrub, a lesson which I learnt on the Nyeri road when I found it so treated and a mass of scarlet flower. It flowers with great frequency all through the year, once it is established, but I must confess that I had it in the garden for about five years before it bloomed at all!

A far more pernickety beauty is *Canarina*, in two or three varying forms. Herbaceous in habit, in that they die down completely after flowering and not coming up every year, but only when the weather suits them. But when they *do* come, soft green growth pushes rapidly up and through some sheltering shrub, ivy shaped leaves, slightly waxy and finally large pendant bells three to four inches long of the softest apricot colours, variously streaked, or blushing with deeper red.

A very beautiful flower, especially in the forms from the deeper forests which are more delicate in outline and in colour, but correspondingly more difficult to grow.

There is a very lovely, but very large *Landolphia* which grows at the coast, and as near as Donyo Sabuk with huge white trumpet flowers, but I fancy only a very large "Wild Garden" could accommodate it, beautiful as it is.

We must not forget the *Thunbergias* while we are discussing creepers. Bright and cheerful as she is, *T. alata* or black eyed Betsy as we are told she is to be called, is too rampant a seeder and grower to be allowed among choice plants but her brothers *T. Gregorii* the glowing plain orange one from the slopes of Ngong and even nearer home and the larger orange *T. Gibsonii* which grows plentifully up country, noticeably in the Solai, round Molo and up to Timboroa; and the chastely beautiful *T. primulina*, primrose coloured with violet eye which one finds from Thika to Fort Hall and again in places back to

near Machakos. All these are very well worthy of prominent places in the garden.

In a large garden one can perhaps afford space for some of the climbing groundsel, *Senecio Petitianus* or *Gynura scandens*, which make so many of our forests gay with bunches of yellow or orange daisy like flowers. The latter is not a true groundsel, but is so like one that it gets included in the name but they are powerful climbers and hardly suited to the average garden.

Of smaller plants, personally I consider all the varieties of the Aloe well worth including in the garden. These plants are commonly called "cactus" or red hot pokers by the unbotanical, but they have no connection with a cactus and indeed I believe I am right in saying that hardly any cactuses are indigenous in Africa at all, only a very few epiphytes of the Rhipsalis order, and here and there an opuntia has been naturalised.

There is a great variety in the Aloe family, from the *A. arborea* type one knows so well both here and round Lake Elmenteita to all the rosette leaved ones which vary all over the country, both in size, leaf and colour, and the only drawback to collecting them is that they all have saw edged leaves and spikey ends, and are fierce to dig up and fiercer as fellow passengers in a car!

Another of the Kenya wildings I saw exhibited in the forefront of a group of hot house plants in London, was a Crossandra, one of the paler salmon coloured spikes with a rosette of leaves close to the ground and which varies from pale to the deep red of the best varieties of tinned salmon, which is so very common here, round Nairobi, *C. subacaulis* by name, and the shrubby *C. nilotica*, with smaller scarlet flowers is a charming thing, and one finds others, all worth collecting.

We have a charming white *Pelargonium multibracteatum* which will grow as a ground cover, or if preferred can easily be induced to climb through shrubs to a considerable height, and a near relation *Monsonia glauca* with yellow geranium like single flowers from the Machakos district.

Notonias, succulent plants in several varieties, but all with red or orange pom-pom heads, are very attractive and charming, especially among rocks and indeed there are many small plants suitable for a rock garden, notably the Craterostigmas, which people will call the Kenya Violet, a misleading name, as they have no real resemblance to a violet, and there are real violets indigenous to the higher forest lands of Kenya. It is true their own name is pretty impossible but they are lovely little things and grow in sheets, usually near some rocky out crop, as soon as the rain comes. One with stalks about two

inches and white and blue flowers, and the other even shorter stemmed with flowers varying from deep violet to a sort of wine pink. They transplant easily enough, and given a sunny spot not overgrown by stronger things, will persist and flower season after season.

Stapelias of several sorts with their odd stars, in some cases very beautiful, and in others rather repellent! Cotelidons of which one at least is very good, a shrubby grower with heads of pendant red bells. Charming little Cyanotis with fluffy blue anthers, and the lovely little Nesaea a wee shrubby plant with soft brown-pink flowers.

Many of the Impatiens, or Balsams are interesting and pretty but they really need shade and such shade as big fig trees, which conserve moisture, and if you have that you can also collect the epiphytic, or tree growing orchids, many of which are pretty though none brilliant. They are very happy pushed into the forks of Mugumu fig trees, and soon make themselves at home.

The ground orchids of Kenya are harder to tame, except for the *Lissochilus*, and the bog growers of that family are easily satisfied by any damp spot, while the pretty little yellow flowered one from dry hillsides, *L. micrantha* is very easy and almost continually in flower.

There are various *Kniphofias*, or red hot pokers, and many of these transplant easily and are happy in good garden soil and there are dwarf varieties that are particularly charming. Camping, years ago, in the forest on the road near Meru, I found and collected a very lovely *Thunbergia* which is neither shrub nor creeper, really more of a herbaceous plant, in that it sends up new shoots each rains, and the older ones die off if the drought is sufficient. It has the deepest, clearest violet trumpets in pairs up the stem, growing from the leaf axils, and seems to grow as happily in the sun as in the shade. A first class plant in fact, as even the Elephants agree, for the herd which passed our camp in the night browsed on it greedily.

A flower which has excited a lot of interest in England is the blue *Delphinium macrocentron*, which is pretty widely distributed over Kenya, though our nearest colonies here are up half way to the Escarpment and in Ngong forest and hills. It is a wonderful colour, true blue, either dark or sky, shaded with green and no red in it. This grows in the garden quite happily, but once established it must be left alone, as it resents any disturbance about its semi-tuberous roots.

There is also a sweetly scented white species, with wide flat open blooms, quite unlike the curious hooded flowers of the blue one. The white is far rarer and far harder to grow or keep in the garden. A blue or lilac species very like it, and also scented has been brought down from just over the Abyssinian border, and has just lately proved



to be a Kenyan plant also. being found on the road to Marsabit. Unfortunately so few of the people whose work lies on the northern frontier happen to be interested in the flowers that grow there, of which I believe there are a great number, and many of them very lovely.

#### BULBS :

Finally there are bulbs, many bulbs, worth collecting; and among bulbs I hope I may be allowed to include the tubers of the *Gloriosa*, which is perhaps our most beautiful wild flower. They grow in one form or another, from the sea shore up to 8,000 or 9,000 ft. Mostly scarlet with yellow centres, but occasionally clear yellow with maroon centres, this last being a very tall species, growing up to 12 or 15 feet in forest land. The tuber is undoubtedly poisonous, and the whole plant is listed among the plants dangerous to cattle. On the other hand the whole country is thick with them, where cattle graze; perhaps the cows are mostly wise enough not to touch them.

Another lovely showy red flower is that of the *Haemanthus multiflorus*, like large pom-poms or powder puffs which come up before their leaves, generally in March. One has to dig deep for the bulb, but it is worth having, and though they will not flower every year they will delight you very often, and at a time when most things are looking pretty tired too.

An even larger plant of the same type is *Buphane Sp.* also supposed to be poisonous to cattle, hence its name. A huge "Poof" of long tubed red flowers forms a gigantic round "head" larger than a man's and as the flowers die the leaves come up like a Japanese fan, very large and long. The plant is common, to my knowledge on the top of the Escarpment, round Lake Naivasha, on Kilima Kiu hills and doubtless in many other places as well.

A very widely distributed plant is *Gladiolus Quartinianus* which also shows wide variations of colour, from pure pale yellow to various streaks and mottling, and up on the highest mountains a wonderful brilliant scarlet fellow grows who has so far shown no desire to live at these comparatively low altitudes. And here again, rumours from the northern frontier tell of lovely *Gladiolus* of various colours and sizes, and I have one, a pure white one, from those parts in my own garden.

A very lovely little bulb which grows all round here and indeed all over most of the Colony is the fragile and delicate looking white flowered *Acidanthera candida*, very sweetly scented and very easy in the garden, also excellent as a cut flower. It is a near relation of the *Gladiolus* and very like them to look at.

The "Kikuyu Lily," that large *Crinum Kirkii*, is known to all and there are several smaller and more refined members of the family

to be found, noticeably *C. heterostylum* up from Eldoret to the slopes of Elgon, which charming little species grows freely with rosy pink flowers only a few inches high; and another a shade bigger, round Ulu and such parts.

There are some pretty Ornithogalums besides the dull greenish flowered ones that grow everywhere, and a host of smaller bulbous stuff, like Bulbine and Urgania both with yellow flowers. *Dipcadi viridis*, a delicate all green "blue" bell and of course the orange red tuberous *Asclepias*, all over the country in damp ground and grassy slopes, but he alas seems so far rather incurably wild.

I hope I have said enough to prove that the flora of Kenya is very largely a flora suitable to garden cultivation, and indeed, if some one starting a garden wanted to make it really interesting and unlike everyone else's, he would grow native plants only and see how lovely it could be.

Many of the plants are not easy to strike as cuttings but given the smallest scrap of root, most of them will grow readily enough, and seed is a sure, and in most cases a quick method of increase.

Very many of the trees and some of the shrubs are procurable from the Forest Department's Nurseries, and with a greater demand no doubt a greater supply would soon be forthcoming.

The experimentalist is sure to collect some plants which do too well, and do really become weeds, but the good ones more than out balance such little annoyances and I can assure you that there are many other plants, besides those I have mentioned which will give you the greatest pleasure if you grow them, and which will interest the visitor from England far more than the sweetest roses or the finest antirrhinums!