

A REDISCOVERED SUCCULENT

By P.R.O. BALLY, *Botanist, Coryndon Museum, Nairobi*

The genus *Monadenium* is small and confined almost entirely to tropical Africa. Only about 50 species are known. It is of particular interest to science by reason of its quite remarkable versatility in growth-forms, which range from dwarf, stemless herbaceous plants to spiny succulents and stout, fleshy trees up to 18 ft. high, while at the same time rigidly maintaining its very characteristic and uniform floral structure.

A thorough knowledge of all the species and of their distribution is likely to contribute substantially to our knowledge of the past history of tropical African vegetation.

In recent years many new species have been described and although it is certain that yet more remain to be discovered, our present knowledge is sufficient to give a fairly accurate picture of the evolution of the genus.

The very first species of this interesting genus was found by the explorer G. Fischer in 1885. It was described as *Monadenium coccineum* in 1895 by F. Pax in *Engl. Jahrb.* XIX, 126. The original plant however perished, together with the bulk of the Berlin Museum, in World War II. Neither the description nor a rather formal illustration of the fragment of a cyme give a satisfactory idea of what the plant is like. Fischer gave neither the locality nor the date of collecting of his specimen, but by computation with other and better annotated plants of his collection it became clear that the locality must be sought some 50 to 60 miles south or south-west of the Speke Gulf, in the region which extends between Lake Victoria and Lake Eyassi.

In March 1937, Mrs. J. Fosbroke, a keen botanist, whose husband was stationed in the Mbulu District, collected an immature plant of a similar *Monadenium* along a cattle track which runs from Endulen in Masailand down to the shores of Lake Eyassi. The plant was, however, not sufficiently mature to allow of comparison with Fischer's plant.



Monadenium Coccineum Pax

1. Drawing from a living plant collected near Endulen, Tanganyika
2. F. Pax's schematized drawing of the inflorescence, from Fischer's type
3. F. Pax's floral diagram of the Genus *Monadenium*

It is most frustrating when the genotype of such an interesting genus remains imperfectly known and the present writer, who was just completing a monograph on the subject, decided to make a special trip to the area in question.

The month of July being the probable date when Fischer collected his plant, it was the obvious choice for the trip. Should the plant be found, it would be at approximately the same stage of development as Fischer's specimen and therefore most suitable for comparison with Pax's description.

Arriving from Oldeani via Ngorongoro Crater, the first locality to be reached was Mrs. Fosbroke's. In the company of Mr. K. Rohde from Oldeani, the writer proceeded by lorry to Endulen, which afforded an excellent camp site near a small river. From there an overgrown track could be followed for a short distance, after which the car had to be left in the thornbush.

After two hours' walk in the direction of the escarpment the ground became rocky and began to drop. It was here that the first plants were encountered, growing in the shelter of bushes; a little further on they were quite common. As anticipated, the plants were precisely at the stage of development of Fischer's type plant, i.e. with their bright scarlet inflorescence fully developed, but leafless. It was thus possible to establish beyond doubt their identity with *Monadenium coccineum*.

The short foot-trek very nearly sealed the fate of the car. It was the season of bushfires, one of which had started up nearby during our absence and the wind carried it rapidly towards the vehicle. Fortunately the writer saw the smoke rolling across the plain from some distance, but it was only by covering the last mile at a run that he was able to drive it to safety out of the danger zone.

Some of the local Masai who were shown our plants subsequently confirmed that they knew them from further west, in Ussukuma, not so very many miles away, in the very region through which Fischer's route ran.

Ample herbarium-material, as well as living plants, were collected: the latter were planted in Nairobi, where they are growing well and have already flowered.