

## ***FROM SEA BAMBOO TO A BOTANICAL FEAST IN FIVE HUNDRED YEARS!***

Nearly 400 botanical specimens from the Overberg area are displayed at the Hermanus Flower and Eco Fair every spring. Hard to believe that a mere 500 years ago the first plant of South African origin to be mentioned by early voyagers was the robust seaweed *Ecklonia maxima* .

Vasco da Gama, on his historic voyage to India in 1497, reported, probably with great relief, “On Wednesday, the first day of the month of November, the day of All Saints, we found many signs of land, which were seaweeds that grow along the coast.” Three days later they sighted land and put down anchor in the bay they named Sta Ellena.

The first Cape botanical note was struck a hundred years later by British captain John Davys commenting in November 1598 : “This land is a good soile and an wholesome Aire, full of good herbes as Mints, Calamint, Plantine, Ribwort, Trifolium, Scabious and such like.” (Raven-Hart 1967).

Meanwhile in faraway Europe the science of botany was in the process of re-awakening and the early seventeenth century saw an intense interest arise in the flora of lands in the throes of discovery. Bulbs, pressed plants and on-the-spot drawings made their arduous way in smallships to waiting scientists in Europe.

Beruffed, bearded and clad in elegant silks and velvet, two physician-botanists from Holland and Belgium, Charles del’Ecluse (Clusius) and Mathias de l’Obel (Lobelius) were the first to contribute illustrations of Cape flowers for printing in the elaborate publications of that century. Clusius, who became Professor of Botany in Leiden and established its botanic garden, published a supplementary volume to his *Rariorum plantarum historia* called *Exoticorum libri decem* in 1605. In it is a picture of a dried inflorescence of *Protea nerifolia*.

Clusius referred to it as “an elegant thistle” and reported that it was collected at Antongil Bay on the north east coast of Madagascar during a Dutch trading expedition to Java in 1597. No way, say the botanists today (Rourke 1980). It must have been picked somewhere along the Cape coast while calling in for fresh water. **This is the first known botanical object to have reached Europe from South Africa.**



Protea nerifolia

Bulbs collected by Dutch sailors at “ that extreme and celebrated Promontory of Aethiopia called the Cape of Good Hope” were grown in Amsterdam and presented to Clusius, who named them *Ornithogalum aethiopicum* – our present day Chinkerinchee?

Meanwhile Mathias de l'Obel (Lobelius) had come across and later published “this plant of rarest elegance among the exotic delights of the gardener I Knibius of Middelburg, Zealand, but it perished after the severe winter.” A second similar bulb, without flowers, was given the name *Narcissus Africanus folio rotundiore*. Experts are certain they were our *Haemanthus coccineus* and *H. rotundifolius* respectively.



*Ornithogalum aethiopicum*



*Haemanthus coccineus*

Another tantalizing reference in de l'Obel's papers, which were published in England after his death, was to a plant “*Ranunculus per elegans D. Franqueville, foliis aculeatis*”. Rasmussen (1979) had identified this as the Cape plant *Knowltonia vesicatoria*. The fact that this Ranunculaceous plant came to be grown in a London garden of rare plants shows how much unrecorded material must have been reaching Europe from overseas at this time.

In the ornately bound and beautifully printed botanical manuals of that era our haemanthus, boophane, chasmanthe, nerine, ornithogalum, arum, albuca, stapelia, oxalis, kniphofia and cotyledon appear in timeless beauty and elegance. They served as upmarket nursery catalogues for the gardens of European and English royalty, wealthy merchants and professional men.



*Oxalis luteola*



*Cotyledon orbiculata*

After Van Riebeeck's settlement of the Cape in 1652 and the establishment of the Company gardens, expeditions into the surrounding countryside brought more reports of the fauna and flora. Shortly after his arrival Van Riebeeck explored around Table Mountain where he found in the kloofs “fine thick and fairly long trees .on some were the dates 1604, 1620 and 1622, but we did not know who carved them.” They called the bay they had reached Hout Bay “in consequence of its forests ..”they were the finest forests in the world.”

By 1681 the Company garden had extended to 21 morgen and was being managed by a master gardener, three under-gardeners and 75 slaves. Travellers passing through were full of praise for these botanical efforts. One of these was Paul Hermann, a medical officer who was the first known person to make a herbarium of the local plants; another was Willem ten Rhyne, a physician who reported in 1673 that “the Company’s garden was a lovely sight with its plantation of lemons, citroens and oranges, its close hedges of rosemary and its laurels ... it is the very essence of greenness set in the midst of thorns and barren thickets.” He also refers to the indigenous flora growing in the “barren” soil - “comely ericas, house leeks of various kinds, Ornithogalums and narcissi. The bulbs of these often equal a human head in size...There are also geraniums which smell sweetly at night.”

This was the Simon van der Stel era when expeditions travelled into the interior, seeking the ‘Copper Mountains’ in Namaqualand, being charged by a rhinoceros in Piketberg and bringing back enough specimens of flora and fauna to keep the artists and botanists busy from the Cape to Europe.

Before the famous Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus put the botanical naming of plants in order, a hugely complicated, diverse procedure was followed. Take our beautiful Silver Tree for instance, *Leucadendron argenteum*, growing on the slopes of Table Mountain for centuries. It was also commonly known as Witteboom or Silwerboom. Botanically though, it was first called *Leucadendros africana, arbor tota argentea, sericea* (African Witteboom, the tree entirely silver-grey). This was by courtesy of physician Leonard Plukenet, who gave his name to our ‘hangertjies’ erica much later. Other Silver Tree names followed: *Conifer Salicis facie..* (Conifer resembling a willow), *Conocarpodendron foliis argenteis sericeis*



**Knowltonia vesicatoria**

*latissimis* (the cone-fruited tree with silver-grey broad leaves), *Pinus africana sive Witteboom* (African pine or Witteboom) and even *Scolymocephalos Africana, foliis sericeis, argenteis, longis, acutis* (African thistle head with long, acute, silver-grey leaves).

Only extremely well-educated scholars with a classical and usually medical background were able to cope with these fanciful descriptions and sometimes even more fanciful portrayals. But our Cape flora has survived the discovery process and continues to enthral us with its infinite beauty - and relatively simpler names.

Ref: Gunn, M., Codd, L.E. 1981. *Botanical Exploration of Southern Africa*. A. A. Balkema, Cape Town.

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