



INDIGENOUS PLANTS IN PUBLIC PARKS AND GARDENS

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Nearly every country has certain characteristics or features of special interest of which the local inhabitants are especially proud and which are of particular interest to the visitor or tourist. These attractions vary from country to country. Some have majestic scenery with mountains, great rivers, tropical forests or beautiful lakes, while others have great cities, sporting facilities or places of historic significance. South Africa has some of these attractions in common with other countries, but, in addition, it has a wealth and diversity of natural flora possibly without parallel in any other part of the world, and of this we are justly proud and, I might add, it is an asset which we might exploit more to our advantage.

South Africa, however, is a vast country and the wild flowers are spread over a very great area. A characteristic of the South African flora is that, although many species occur widely—indeed, some are to be found all the way from the Cape Peninsula to Abyssinia—many of them are very restricted in their distribution, and the visitor to this country and even we ourselves have little opportunity of seeing all the species as they occur in their natural state. If the public, therefore, is unable to see the flowers in their natural environment, let us make growing collections of them at suitable places. One such place where this has been done is the National Botanic Gardens of South Africa at Kirstenbosch; another is our regional branch the Karoo Garden at Worcester, and others will be added in due course.

The beauty and wealth of our flora was realised in the early days of European civilisation in South Africa, and the serious collecting of plants in this country for study and for growing in Europe began as early as the 17th century.

It is interesting to note that the early rise to fame of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew was due in no small measure to the additions to its collections of plants from South Africa. For example, Francis Masson, who was employed at Kew, was first sent to the Cape in 1772 to collect plants for the Gardens. He collected a great variety of plants and the value of his work was

specially mentioned in a memorandum sent to the King by Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society. I quote from this memorandum: "I am confident that the famous Journey to the Levant, made by Monsr. Tournefort by the order of Lewis XIV, at an immense expense, did not produce so great an addition of plants to the Paris Gardens as Mr. Masson's Voyage to the Cape only has done to that of Kew."

It is not necessary to give more details of the early interest in the South African flora and of its introduction into gardens overseas, but perhaps special mention should be made of that great traveller and collector, William J. Burchell, who arrived in this country towards the end of 1810. He travelled over most of the Cape Province as we know it to-day, but seemed to be particularly impressed with the Cape Peninsula. He remarked that the natural flora was most exquisite and was amazed that the local inhabitants took particular pride in their "carnations, hollyhocks, balsimes, tulips and hyacinths, while they viewed all the elegant productions of their hills as mere weeds."

He it was who advocated the establishment of a Botanic Garden, and he wrote: "And if in the vicinity of Cape Town, a well-ordered **botanic garden**, of sufficient extent, were established for the purpose of receiving plants which might casually, or even expressly, be collected in the more distant parts of the colony, the sum of money required for maintaining it would be but trifling in comparison with the advantages which science, and the public botanic gardens of England, would derive from it."

Please note that Burchell made special mention of the indigenous flora!

A period of about 100 years elapsed before this dream came true, and the National Botanic Gardens of South Africa were established at Kirstenbosch in 1913.

The disinterestedness of the local inhabitants in their own flora to which Burchell referred unfortunately persists to a certain degree even to this day, and I wonder whether parks departments of some municipalities are still guilty in this respect. During the last few years, however, I must admit, there has been an awakening of interest in

our native flora, but it has not been enough, and one must hope that this interest will increase steadily until our lovely flowers find their rightful places in our homes and gardens. It is amazing how many people outside South Africa take a very keen interest in our flora, not only from the botanical and horticultural points of view, but also purely from the aesthetic. In my official capacity I have met many visitors from different parts of the world whose main object in coming to South Africa has been to see the wild flowers.

I therefore make this request: **Use indigenous plants on a larger scale in your parks and gardens**, and help to make not only our visitors but also South Africans more conscious of the beauty that is theirs.

One often hears the remark that the wild flowers of South Africa are difficult to grow. We at Kirstenbosch are apt to reply that this is not the case and that these plants are as easy to grow as any other garden plants, but I must admit that our tongues are often in our cheeks when saying so. Let us admit it then; while it is a simple matter to raise many of our species, there are some which require more than ordinary care and skill. The average property-owner who entrusts the care and management of his garden to an untrained and inexperienced garden boy, therefore, cannot expect success with all our species.

It is for this very reason that I appeal to you. **You** have the training, **you** have the knowledge and experience of horticulture and in your departments **you** have adequate facilities. We at Kirstenbosch are doing what we can to display to the public, both from South Africa and overseas, the beauty of our natural flora, but there are many tourists who do not have the opportunity of visiting Cape Town and, in fact, many South Africans have never seen Kirstenbosch!

Wild flowers grown in the public parks and gardens of our towns and cities would be a source of pleasure to all concerned, and, I might add, of educational interest.

I am not suggesting that you should attempt to exclude all exotic species from your gardens, nor to organise your departments on the lines adopted by Kirstenbosch and its branches. Kirstenbosch is a **scientific institution** and two of the main objects are the **study** of our natural flora and its **preservation** by cultivation. Approximately 4,000 different species of South African plants are already growing in the Gardens and each year we add to the list. By no means all of them are subjects for colourful displays in public gardens, and they are grown to save them from extermination

in their natural state. The encroachment on our natural vegetation by agriculture, forestry, industry and housing is wiping out large areas of indigenous plants and every effort should be made now, before it is too late, to save what remains. Fires and the spread of exotic vegetation are also responsible for reducing the natural flora. The Australian wattles, *Acacia cyanophylla* and *Acacia cyclops*, for example, have taken almost complete control of the Cape Flats, and another species, *Acacia dealbata*, is spreading rapidly in the summer-rainfall areas of South Africa. While the wattles occur mainly at lower levels, Hakea and the Cluster Pine (*Pinus pinaster*) are invading the mountains. Parks and Gardens Departments cannot be expected to include the study and preservation of the natural flora as two of their main functions, but undoubtedly indigenous plants could feature more prominently in their towns and cities.

By growing more of these plants you will be satisfying a public demand. People want to see the wild flowers; they want to know more about them, and I would suggest that wherever possible suitable labels should be used to indicate the species and if possible their natural distribution.

I can almost feel the question developing in your minds—"Where are we to obtain seeds?" and that is quite a legitimate question to ask. In our case, the introduction of species hitherto not grown in the Gardens also presents its difficulties.

There is an unwritten understanding, a "gentlemen's agreement" you may call it, among scientific Botanic Gardens throughout the world—and Russia is not excluded—that seeds are exchanged between Institutions. Thus a Botanic Garden wishing to build up its collections will obtain seeds from other Institutions, but as the activities of the National Botanic Gardens of South Africa are devoted exclusively to South African species we are unable to take advantage of this scheme.

Special expeditions are therefore arranged to collect seeds from the wilds for introduction into the Gardens, and interested persons throughout the Union continually send in material. Once a species is established in the Gardens, seed-crops are harvested from the cultivated plants, and these seeds are made available to Botanic Gardens throughout the world.

The Botanical Society of South Africa was established at the same time as the Gardens, forty-four years ago, to give moral and financial support to the new Institution. Apart from other privileges, members share in the free distribution of seed from Kirstenbosch and the Karoo Garden at Worcester,

which is one of the branches of the National Botanic Gardens of South Africa. When our other branches have been established, seed will be available from them also.

I have not yet answered the question as to where you could obtain seeds of the indigenous species.

Several municipalities and parks departments are members of the Society, but the numbers should be greatly increased, and I trust that each one of you will take back a recommendation that your city or town council should join the Society. In this way you would be entitled to a quota of seeds from the National Botanic Gardens of South Africa. The amount you would receive, it is true, would be comparatively small and would certainly be insufficient for your needs. An association, however, would be established between yourselves and us which would be both cordial and mutually beneficial. Application forms for membership are obtainable from the Secretary, Botanical Society of South Africa, Kirstenbosch, Newlands, C.P.

To obtain the large quantities of seed which you would require if you extend your plantings of indigenous species as I have suggested, some other scheme will have to be evolved. The Trustees of the National Botanic Gardens of South Africa have laid down that seeds are distributed free of charge to members of the Botanical Society of South Africa and to scientific institutions similar to our own, and sold to the horticultural trade only. Under these conditions Parks and Gardens Departments can obtain seeds direct from us only by becoming members of the Society.

If the response to my appeal is sufficiently encouraging and if I am assured that Parks Departments wish to establish indigenous plants on a large scale, I am willing to approach my Trustees with a view to arranging some scheme whereby municipalities and similar bodies may purchase surplus seeds in bulk from the National Botanic Gardens of South Africa.



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