

New England Botanical Club – Minutes of the 1030th Meeting

2 November 2007

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The 803rd meeting of the New England Botanical Club, being the 1030th since its original organization, was held on Friday, November 2, 2007, in the lecture hall of the Fairchild Biochemistry Building at Harvard University, Divinity Avenue, Cambridge, MA. There were 31 members and guests in attendance.

Dr. Laurence J. Dorr of the Smithsonian Institution delivered the evening address, entitled “Ny Hasina: The Gift, Madagascar’s Contribution to Horticulture.” The talk drew in part on the extensive research for his book *Plant Collectors in Madagascar and the Comoro Islands* (1997). This Texas-sized island was originally colonized by people of Indonesian origins about 1500 years ago and its recorded history begins with early Arab settlements in the 7th century. Recorded European contact began with the arrival of a storm-driven Portuguese ship in 1500.

Botanical records prior to 1600 were few, though a few medicinal or aromatic plants are thought to have been exported by the Portuguese in the early 1500s. By the turn of the century a few plates appeared in European publications, including one attributed to the Dutchman Jan Huygen van Linschoten showing the spiny and succulent vegetation of a dry landscape, supposedly at St. Augustine’s Bay.

French explorers increasingly visited Madagascar during the 17th century as part of France’s attempt to increase her influence in that part of the world. One step in that effort was the formation of the Société Française de l’Orient. Étienne de Flacourt, a director-general of this company, published *Histoire de la grande isle de Madagascar* in 1658 before running afoul of Barbary pirates off Portugal. One of the plants Flacourt noted was the rosy periwinkle, *Catharanthus roseus*. This species was in European cultivation no later than 1756 and revenues from horticultural sales now exceed \$40 million annually. In addition it is the source of two compounds used to treat Hodgkin’s lymphoma and childhood leukemia. Flacourt also illustrated the distinctive pitchers of *Nepenthes madagascariensis*, though he probably did not know of its carnivorous habits. Despite its exotic appearance, this species did not enter cultivation until 1821 in Mauritius and 1879 in Europe.

Still more distinctive plants of Madagascar came to the attention of Europeans during the 18th century. *Ravenala madagascariensis*, now widely distributed in the Tropics, made early stops in Mauritius, India, and Burma. It is a utilitarian species, contributing materials for construction and other purposes. The ornamental *Buddleja madagascariensis* also made its first stop in Mauritius during the 1700s.

Wenceslas Bojer brought many notable species out of Madagascar. The most spectacular of these was the red-flowered, leguminous royal poinciana tree, *Delonix regia*, found in cultivation in eastern Madagascar. While widely introduced into cultivation in the early 1800s, it was unknown in the wild in Madagascar until its discovery in a karst region of western Madagascar. Bojer was also responsible for discovering the widely grown crown-of-thorns, *Euphorbia milii*.

The central plateau of interior Madagascar was explored much later than the coasts, but yielded many interesting finds, including several species of *Dombeya*. A number of these trees bear large hanging inflorescences of brightly colored flowers. One is the parent of the widely grown hybrid *Dombeya* × *cayeuxii*.

Violent reactions against proselytizing Christians sometimes made use of a poisonous native species, *Cerbera manghas*, which is also found in Indonesia. Another unusual species is the aquatic *Aponogeton madagascariensis*, now popular in the aquarium trade. The common name, lace leaf, is apt since the leaves consist of little more than a lacy skeleton of veins. Yet another famous species is the orchid *Angraecum sesquipedale*. The large ivory-colored flowers of this plant bear nectar spurs nearly a foot long. Upon seeing this plant, Darwin postulated the existence of a hawkmoth pollinator with a proboscis of comparable length. Such a moth was indeed found years later.

More recent contributions to horticulture include many species of *Kalanchoe*, some of which are mainstays of the house-plant trade under names such as panda plant and air plant. The triangle palm (*Neodypsis decaryi*), rare in Madagascar, is widely grown in tropical locations. A gigantic aroid found in coastal swamps, *Typhonodorum lindleyanum*, has been introduced to other tropical locations for its edible seeds or as a novelty. Another novelty is the man-eating tree reported in the late 1800s but never described by science. It is said to paralyze and entwine its prey, variously reported to be men or young girls. Thus despite the several centuries of botanical exploration, this exotic island still holds some secrets.