



WEIRD WEEDS OF SCILLY

AGAPANTHUS

Agapanthus is certainly not everyone's idea of a weed but its self-seeding, irrepressible nature on Scilly places it firmly into this category. The definition of the word "weed" is elusive. 'A plant in the wrong place' is the oft-quoted phrase but who decides if a place is right or wrong? It all depends on your point of view. So it is with the plants themselves, their very names can be the source of debate if not confusion. So it is with agapanthus...

There appear to be two schools of thought concerning the meaning of "agapanthus". I have always understood that the word is derived from the Greek "agape" meaning love and "anthos" meaning flower. Apparently, this reading is merely a reflection of irresponsible romanticism and a lack of intellectual and moral vigour. The correct interpretation, I am told, rests on the fact that the root verb "agapeo" translates as "...to be well contented with".

Mistakenly, I had believed for years that this beautiful South African was a "flower of love". As such it had a talismanic power, which could influence affairs of the heart in the most positive manner. I shall not bore you with the details, suffice to say a sharper mind might have questioned the totemic value of the agapanthus sooner, given the feeble ratio of flowers sent to courtship success. I can only hope that someone ended up "well contented"! I have not let this detract from my appreciation of this handsome plant: rather it is just another layer in the patina of personal, historic and social references and significances that surround the agapanthus.

Scilly is littered with huge clumps of *Agapanthus praecox*, their lush, deep-green and strap-like leaves providing year long foliage. As summer wears on, their fat, blue flowerheads run through the Scillonian landscape with a







painterly abandon. Other species, such as *A. inapertus* with its drooping, dark blue flowers, flourish here also, but it is *A. praecox* which demonstrates a true lust for life on Scilly.

Plants of *Agapanthus praecox* were first introduced to the Abbey Gardens on Tresco in 1856 and since then have gradually spread themselves across the islands. A native of South Africa, the genus contains ten species of which *Agapanthus praecox* and its subspecies are the most used in British gardens. The beautiful heads of blue flowers produce an abundance of papery black seeds, which germinate freely on the Isles of Scilly, while the clement climate also encourages rapid vegetative growth.



Their invasive tendencies are so finely tuned to the conditions here that, until ten years ago, an enormous rockery beneath Tresco Abbey was hidden from view, having been consumed by the agapanthus' insatiable desire for lebensraum. It was only by researching photographs from the early 1900's that the extent of the loss was realised. In areas of Australia where agapanthus presents a serious threat to native flora, this capacity for colonization is well recognized.

Swathes of agapanthus now populate the sand dunes around the gardens. So numerous are they, that during the months of July and August the flowers were, until recently, harvested and sent to market. Agapanthus cutting was one of the favourite jobs of the year. The gardeners could be found early of a midsummer's morning, wading through the marram grass on the dunes, with huge bundles of agapanthus flowers under their arms. The long grass held the heavy dew, forcing us all to wear our heavy waterproof leggings. Their bright yellow only seemed to make the agapanthus more blue. Nobody ever spoke much. The morning's stillness was punctuated only by the snip of secateurs and the lazy flop of a wave breaking on the beach. It was a treasured occupation.





The agapanthus, however, is rather more than just a pretty face. To think of the agapanthus only in terms of its ability to reproduce and its horticultural worth is to restrict oneself to admiring style at the expense of content. As with so many of our garden plants, the agapanthus has a significance way beyond the horticultural confines placed upon it by us gardeners. In South Africa, the agapanthus is used as antenatal and postnatal medicine for both mother and child. The plant's Xhosa name is isicakathi, which doubles for the name of the decoction itself. Sometimes a plant of agapanthus is cultivated in a pot of water and, after the fourth and fifth months of pregnancy, a measure of the water is drunk each morning and evening. During birth, difficult labours are eased by its application.

In South Africa, the medicinal use of plants such as agapanthus is widespread and provides much of the country's primary health care. Sixty percent of South Africans use traditional medicine, provided by around 200,000 traditional healers, most commonly known as "inyanga" or "sangoma". In the province of KwaZulu Natal alone, approximately 4000 tons of plant material, from 400 different species, are used annually by some 6,000,000 indigenous plant consumers. Many will seek the advice of a sangoma in conjunction with modern medical practices. The industry is currently worth over two billion Rand per annum to the nation's economy.

The scale of use can have a devastating effect on the indigenous flora. The majority of the material used is collected from the wild. The Pineapple Lily, *Eucomis autumnalis*, is currently a much sought after late-

flowering bulb for our herbaceous borders. In the hands of an inyanga the *Eucomis* is used to treat everything from stomach ache to syphilis. A single market, in Durban, is responsible for shifting over 73 tons of *Eucomis* bulbs a year. Conservationists are understandably deeply concerned about the often rapine collection methods, which threaten plants such as *Eucomis autumnalis*.

The example above highlights not only the very real importance of plants in global healthcare but also the often impossible task of balancing the needs of the poorest of our own species against the survival of world biodiversity. Silverglen Medicinal Plant Nursery, situated just outside Durban, is helping to find an equilibrium. Its mission since 1986 has been to pass on propagation and cultivation skills to traditional medical practitioners, in order to preserve wild populations of plant species and their sustainable use. Such schemes offer a genuine source of hope for the future but, as with so many projects like Silverglen, the spectre of funding is never far away.

The meaning of agapanthus is not limited to the realms of etymology. Meaning can be dictated by one's perception, and the perception of agapanthus held by a British gardener will not be the same as that of an Australian plant conservationist or that of a hard-pressed sangoma in South Africa. So it is that the agapanthus is both a choice garden plant, a weed and a precious source of medicine. Agapanthus may be categorised as a weird weed in The Islander but it is certainly a plant to be well contented with too. ■

