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FLOWERS OF THE CHINESE NEW YEAR

ONE of the most interesting customs in Canton, China, is that connected with the Chinese New Year, a variable date which may occur, according to the foreign calendar, some time during the month of January or February. On the Chinese New Year (February 15 of this year), every Chinese family in Canton feels the necessity of having in its home some flowers appropriate to the New Year season. All shops are likewise decorated. Every sampan, the home of the boat people, has its splash of color and so does the junk and flower boat. Without this symbol of life, and without the decorations of scarlet-red paper, the spirit of the New Year season seems lacking.

To prepare for the great number of flowers demanded at this holiday season, peonies (*Paeonia suffruticosa* Anderson) are shipped from the north; water lilies are imported from Chungchow, Fukien Province; villagers scour the hillsides for azaleas (*Rhododendron* spp.) and Chinabells (*Enkianthus quinqueflorus* Loureiro), and the peasant or farmer cuts branches from his flowering peach trees (*Prunus persica* Linn.) and brings them to the market. Through long custom two or three areas in Canton have been entirely turned over to this interesting flower market; the most celebrated is that region near the Sap Sam Hong district, but the broad street, Wing On Road is also used to some extent. In these two areas for the two or three days preceding the New Year and especially on the last day of the old year, the streets on both sides are literally lined with thousands upon thousands of flowering branches suitable to the New Year season. The water lilies are placed in shallow porcelain containers or in wooden tubs. The branches of peach and Chinabells are placed in porcelain jars or earthen jugs. Peonies and camellias are attractively arranged on wooden frames. All during the day and especially the last evening of the old year, the streets are crowded with a kaleidoscopic aggregation of cheerful, happy, hurrying, hustling humanity, most eager to purchase flowers for home, boat or shop needed on the morrow. The purchase is always

accompanied by the ever old custom of bargaining and good-natured haggling over prices. The prospective buyer asks the price and receives an answer; if the price is too much, he offers a lower price and if not accepted, he moves away. The owner calls out a slightly lower price but the prospective buyer moves on and tries the same process somewhere else. He may even return to the same seller and begin all over again until he obtains what he thinks is a just price. If, however, the seller agrees to his offer, the purchaser is honor bound to pay, even if the purchaser realizes too late that he has offered too much.

Here one might see a prosperous merchant accompanied by his rickshaw coolie, carrying a large peach tree costing approximately five or six dollars Chinese currency; jostling in the crowd next to him may be a poor ragged, grass-shod, rickshaw coolie, proudly carrying home a small branch of Chinabells (*Enkianthus*), costing possibly only two dimes. Or, one might see a group of well-dressed, hatless, joking, jovial, joyous students in long Chinese dark-blue, padded coats, for the air is cold and brisk; or the ever present short dark-coated merchant or artisan's helper. Occasionally, in the early evening, one might see a group of gorgeous silk-clad, satin embroidered slippered, immaculately groomed, elegantly perfumed and brilliantly jade-bedecked Chinese girls, traveling always in groups or followed by the ever-present servant or "amah." The "amah" acts as a bodyguard, and devotedly attends to the least wish or whim of her mistress. Perchance one might see an Englishman from Shameen, with brown coat, golf trousers and Scotch-plaid golf socks, somewhat aloof, with heavy walking stick and gloves, out for a brisk walk ignoring the crowds, but occasionally stopping to admire or bargain for some choice flowers or an ancient bronze jar.

Relatively few kinds of flowers are used for the New Year festival, the beginning of the first or holiday moon. The commonest flowers used during this holiday season are briefly discussed below.

1. **Chinese New Year Lily, Water Fairy Flower, or Chinese Sacred Lily** (*Narcissus tazetta* Linnaeus), "Shiu Sin Fa."

This represents probably the most common flower of the China New Year festival and the Chinese people adore it for the pure snow-whiteness of its petals and its rich fragrance. This is the same species that is extensively grown in the United States. The contrast of these fragrant blossoms, with narrow elongated rich green leaves, bursting forth from out of the shaggy brown bulbs, symbolizes the beginning of a new year. It is always available and can be obtained at very low prices, ranging from one or two to four or five dimes, depending upon the variety and method of slicing the bulbs. There are two major types: those with split erect bulbs and erect stems with single or double fragrant flowers, and those with peculiarly cut and often horizontally sliced bulbs, resulting in numerous closely compact curved groups of closely associated flowers, giving a crowded horizontal and brilliantly colored mass of fragrant flowers. These are cut in such a way as



Photograph courtesy of Prof. G. W. Groff, Lingnan University, Canton, China.

PLATE I. Chinese New Year scene in Canton, showing both types of Chinese New Year Lily. Note grass used for string, students in old and modern costume, and the merchant in background.

to form beautiful and delicate designs simulating various objects. If the design is especially pleasing the cost is considerably more. These are very fragrant and attractive, and are prepared in such a manner that the blooms will be at their maximum at the beginning of the Chinese New Year. This constitutes quite an industry and has been admirably discussed in a paper by McClure.¹ This industry is confined to a tiny area of about ten hamlets to the east of Yellow Mountain, Wong Shan, in the vicinity of Changehow, Southern Fukien.

This plant and the Camellia are also very commonly used as flower offerings to the various gods in the temples, at which time the bearers ask for sons or prosperity for the New Year.

2. **Chinabells** (*Enkianthus quinqueflorus* Loureiro), "Tiu Chung Fa."

This beautiful example of the Heath family (Ericaceae) is rather common in the nearby mountains and is extensively cut and brought into the market. Its beautiful pendulous clusters of white, pale pink or rose colored bell-like flowers make a very pleasing and appropriate New Year flower. Each cluster may have 4 to 15 flowers and the prospective buyer always tries to purchase the branch that has the most flowers in a cluster. If placed in large water jars, these branches will keep for a period of a week or two, the flowers gradually enlarging in size, later being accompanied by the developing of young, delicate green shoots and leaves which add considerably to the gay color scheme. Large clusters of flowers are supposed to bring good luck.

3. **Peach** (*Prunus persica* Linnaeus and forms), "To."

The large branches and in fact the entire trees of the peach are brought in regularly to the market. There are two or three color forms, ranging from pale pink to coral pink, and some with almost blood-red blossoms. The larger branches or trees are rather expensive and are more commonly seen in the large silk hong (shops) or are purchased by the well-to-do.

4. **Apricot** (*Prunus mume* Sieb. & Zucc.), "Mooi."

This is only occasionally used and is not as common at the New Year time as the peach. It is, however, extensively cultivated in Chinese gardens. The flowers are a pale delicate pink and the double flowering forms are often pure white. The cut branches are not very satisfactory, as the flowers soon drop off.

5. **Tree peony** (*Paeonia suffruticosa* Anderson, *P. moutan* Sims), "Mau Tan."

These are not grown locally in Kwangtung; each year they are shipped down from the north. This shrubby biternate-leaved plant has large beautiful attractive pink flowers, often four to five inches across. The flowers should be fully open on

¹ Hongkong Naturalist Vol. III, p. 186-193, t. 26-29, and fig. 1-2 (1932).



Photographs courtesy of Dr. W. W. Cadbury, Supt. Sun Yat-sen Medical College and Canton Hospital, Lingnan University.

PLATE II. Scenes in Canton before its partial destruction, showing Chinabells.

New Year's day. If the weather is unusually cold, the buds do not open and often the seller is left with hundreds of plants on his hands, as the Chinese will not purchase them if they think the flowers will only be in bud on New Year's day. One rather cold year the gardener in charge of the Lingnan University greenhouse purchased a large number of these plants and forced them in the heated greenhouse, so that the plants that he forced were the only ones to flower in Canton on that particular Chinese New Year; they actually brought fabulous prices in the open market.

This peony has a long history in China; before 600 A.D. it was primarily used for medicinal purposes, but after that date was extensively used as an ornamental. One kind has been used to give to friends as a gift on separation, or often as a family remembrance upon the return of some member after separation, in a way similar to the forget-me-not of America. The tree peony is called "Hwa Wang," or King of Flowers, and has been cultivated extensively by nobility, the literary and the rich; it has become a favorite subject in art, in literature, in ceramics, in textiles, and in prose and poetry. It is often found associated with the Phoenix, the King of Birds, and these two together were extensively embroidered and depicted on the trousseaux of princesses.

6. **Azalea** or *Rhododendron* (*Rhododendron* spp., mostly *R. Ferraræ* Tate, *R. Simsii* Pl. and cultivated forms of *R. indicum* Linnaeus), "To Kuen."

A few years ago the only azaleas found in the New Year market were the native brick-red species (*R. Simsii*) and the delicate lovely lavender-tinted species (*R. Ferraræ*). Whole bushes were dug up from the nearby mountains and brought into the market. More recently Japanese varieties of azaleas have been introduced into the Chinese trade and many beautiful varieties of these are now found during this holiday season. As *R. Simsii* occurs commonly on the nearby mountains, grows vigorously, flowers abundantly, and is endowed with the favored brick red color of the holiday season, it has special significance at this time. By some, however, it is supposed to be a tragic flower, in contrast to its smiling, bright, flashing beauty, and as one legend goes, it was supposed to spring from the tears of blood of the cuckoo. The cuckoo was supposed to be the reincarnation of a boy in search of his lost brother who was persecuted from home by his stepmother.

7. **Camellia** (*Camellia japonica* Linnaeus: *Thea japonica* (L.) Nois.), "Shan Ch'a."

This shrub with beautiful dark green, shining foliage and usually delicate pink flowers is seen in the market either as shapely shrubby bushes, beautifully cultivated in attractive flower pots, or as cut branches. Red and white forms are not often seen during the holiday season. The larger shrubs are expensive.

This flower, as mentioned above, is extensively used as a floral offering to the temple gods when special requests for the New Year are presented. It may be



Photograph courtesy of Prof. G. W. Groff, Lingnan University, Canton, China.

PLATE III. Another Chinese New Year scene, with Chinese Sacred Lily, Peach branches and ornate Chinese porcelain.

mentioned also in passing that this flower is never worn as an ornament in a lady's hair, for the large buds of the Camellia take a whole year to open. To the Chinese this would symbolize the fact that a woman would have to wait one whole year for a son—much too long a period—and so the Camellia is not used by women as a floral decoration. For this purpose the following species are used: "Orchid tree" (*Aglaiia odorata* Lour.), "Mai Tsai Lan or Shue Lan"; "Pearl orchid tree" (*Chloranthus spicata* Makino), "Chue Lan"; "White and Yellow Jade Orchid tree" (*Michelia alba* DC., *M. Champaca* Linn.), but not, however, at the Chinese New Year.

8. **Waxflower** or Wintersweet (*Chimonanthus praecox* Linnaeus: *Merätia praecox* Wilson), "Lap Mooi" or "La Mei Hua."

This shrub with the flowers appearing before the leaves is occasionally seen. The delicate waxy yellow flowers with the inner sepals beautifully striped with pale purplish brown, are very fragrant and eagerly sought.

Occasionally other flowers or fruits are found in the market at this season, such as Buddas' fingers (*Citrus medica* Linn. var. *sarcodoctylus* Swingle), flowers of the plum (*Prunus japonica* Thunb.), peculiar fruited species of *Solanum*, various dwarf forms of oranges, kumquats and orchids. It should also be mentioned that there are always a few practical jokers who cunningly and artistically prepare composite sprays of leaves of one species and flowers of another, which they try to sell at high prices because of their rarity, and take great delight in trying to fool the general public. Being a botanist any unusual blossom or fruit at once attracts my attention. The writer remembers, very much to his chagrin, the purchase of one of these beautiful hand-made floral fakes, which his Chinese companion, without saying a word, allowed him to purchase. Upon subsequent investigation this proved to be a clever, temporary, artificial arrangement between two entirely unrelated species. His Chinese companion had a good laugh at the writer's expense.¹

¹ I am however, consoled by the fact that I have not been the only botanist thus "taken in." One of Augustine Henry's Chinese collectors "manufactured" a dried botanical specimen by combining parts of two entirely different species so skillfully that when the specimen was studied at Kew it was described and illustrated as a new genus and a new species, *Actinotinus sinensis* Oliv. in Hook. Ic. 18: t. 1740. 1889. The author indicated in the original description that while the floral characters were those of *Viburnum*, yet the vegetative characters were those of *Aesculus*, the two genera of course belonging in totally unrelated families. The hoax was not detected until a year later when a critical re-examination of the type specimen showed that the collector had so skillfully attached the inflorescence of a species of *Viburnum* to a terminal leafy branch of an *Aesculus* that neither the highly skilled botanist who studied it nor the widely experienced artist who prepared the drawing, detected the artifact at the time the description and the drawing were prepared.

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