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## Cape heaths in eastern Ireland.

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*Erica* species from South Africa, or Cape heaths as they are often called, were fashionable plants in northern Europe during the first few decades of the nineteenth century. At that period plant-hunters were combing southern Africa, especially the Cape of Good Hope, for beautiful plants and were sending back scores of previously unknown *Erica* species to the Royal Gardens at Kew and to nurserymen and gardeners elsewhere in Europe. These new plants created enormous interest among horticulturists and the general public as they were amongst the most attractive plant introductions at that time. The colour of the flowers ranged from deep red to white and yellow.

Over 180 species of southern African heaths were growing at the Royal Gardens, Kew, in 1811 and 250 species were cultivated at the Dublin Society's Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, in 1818.

In the last 150 years interest in the Cape heaths has declined everywhere. The climate in Ireland, Britain and most of northern Europe is too cold for their culture outdoors and these plants need to be grown under glass. As costs of heating and labour increased during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, more and more *Erica* enthusiasts turned their attention to more easily grown plants that were appearing on the horticultural scene. Many of the Cape species that were once so popular have been lost to cultivation.

Brian Morley, writing about southern hemisphere plants in *Irish gardening and horticulture* (Royal Horticultural Society of Ireland, Dublin, 1979) stated that

a few South African *Erica* can still be seen in milder Irish gardens, such as *E. taxifolia* and *E. pageana* at Rossdohan [near Sneem, County Kerry], but the hardy European species of *Erica* and *Calluna* now attract the attention of the Irish gardener.



Fig. 1. *Erica glandulosa* at Earlscliffe, Howth [E. C. Nelson].

Admittedly European heathers are easier to grow in Britain and Ireland and are among the most valuable woody plants for garden decoration. But they lack some of the special features that make the Cape heaths such supremely beautiful plants. Many of the South African *Erica* species have large tubular flowers in bright, vivid colours and the plants are often much taller and larger than their European counterparts.

Circumstances have changed since the short-lived Cape heath craze in the early nineteenth century and another look at these remarkable plants for outdoor use in Ireland and the milder parts of Britain could well be rewarding. As with many other plant introductions in the last century, much emphasis was placed on testing the plants under glass. It is unlikely that any serious effort was made to investigate systematically the suitability of Cape heaths for outdoor use in mild areas of these islands. Where a plant can survive outdoors it generally thrives better there than under glass. The plant will have a larger, unrestricted root-run and will not be affected by the very high temperatures, low humidity and poor ventilation that can occur in a greenhouse. In addition, the Cape

*Erica* species are mostly plants of mountains, growing on acid, nutrient-poor soil and used to almost constant air movement. Undoubtedly many Cape heaths in cultivation were killed by lack of ventilation and air movement in glasshouses and by over-dosing with fertilisers.

In 1986, I decided to add to the number of South African *Erica* species growing in the open in my garden at Earlscliffe, Bally, County Dublin. *E. glandulosa* (Fig. 1) had been planted in 1974 and had survived all winters since then. *E. canaliculata*, *E. pageana*, *E. cruenta* and *E. mollis* were added in 1986; the hybrid *E. x hiemalis* was also tried.

Earlscliffe is a coastal garden situated on the southern side of the Howth peninsula just north of Dublin (53° 4' N latitude and 6° W longitude). The soil, derived from Cambrian shale and quartzite, is a clay to silty clay-loam, well drained with approximately 12% coarse sand, 13% fine sand, 47% silt and 28% clay in the 0-100 mm layer. The soil is shallow, much of the area having only about 20 cm of top soil. The natural pH is between 5.0 and 5.5 and the organic matter content around 4.5% in the top 7.5 cm.

Most of the 2.75 ha garden has a gentle slope to the south but close to the southern boundary it falls steeply to the edge of the Irish Sea. Cliffs, 80 metres high, along the southern boundary help to deflect the worst of the southerly gales over the garden. The site is well protected on the north and east by the Hill of Howth, which reaches a maximum height of 180 m. Shelter on the west is provided by a belt of tall trees, mainly lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta*), Monterey cypress (*Cupressus macrocarpa*) and sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*).

The garden has been maintained largely by means of a herbicide regime since 1969. Simazine at 1.7 kg a.i./ha is applied twice a year as an overall application in April and July. Any surviving weeds are treated with spot applications with appropriate leaf-acting herbicides, usually glyphosate or paraquat, as necessary throughout the year. Occasionally weeds are pulled out by hand but no hoeing or cultivation is given. An attempt is made to kill all weeds before they shed seeds. This goal is largely but not completely achieved. No evidence of a build-up of resistant weed biotypes or herbicide residues has occurred after 25 years.

All the African *Erica* that I planted in 1986 have survived except *E. x hiemalis* which never established well and died in the winter



Fig. 2. *Erica canaliculata* at Earlscliffe, Howth, May 1990 [E. C. Nelson].

after planting. The experience gained in the last eight years suggests that many more South African *Erica* species than those listed by Morley will survive outdoors in mild coastal areas. Because of the generally milder climate that their gardens enjoy, gardeners in Ireland are better placed than those in most of Britain to exploit Cape heaths both for garden decoration and as a potential commercial crop.

Outdoors, large plants make an extensive root run but the bulk of the root system is close to the soil surface. All heathers dislike root disturbance and resent cultivation around their roots. The present availability of soil-acting herbicides is another factor that has changed since the days of Cape heath mania. The careful use of herbicides is a valuable aid to weed control and is likely to be a contributory factor, along with the mild climate and acid soil, which enables a number of tender *Erica* species to flourish in my garden in north County Dublin without special attention.

Probably the most noteworthy is *Erica canaliculata* (Fig. 2), formerly grown as *E. melanthera*. This reached a height of 2.5 m in five years, despite periodic cutting back, and promises to grow much

taller. In Ireland, flower buds are clearly visible on the plant from November onwards and the flowers are open between March and May. The flowers are small but are borne in enormous numbers and are an attractive violet-pink with conspicuous, contrasting black anthers. The flowers are carried on spectacular spikes that may be 60 to 80 cm long, and they last well after cutting.

With the increasing demand for flowers for interior decoration *E. canaliculata* appears to have potential as a commercial cut-flower crop for British and European markets. Such an enterprise would need to be located in specially selected coastal areas. However, this species is one of the easiest to root from cuttings, which can be taken over a long period, and the young plants grow vigorously.

Although *Erica glandulosa* never experiences frost where it grows wild in the Western Cape, it has not been damaged by temperatures down to  $-5^{\circ}\text{C}$  in north County Dublin. This heath is easily identified as the leaves are covered with glandular hairs so that the young leaves at the shoot tip will stick together in a characteristic way when the shoot is lightly squeezed between finger and thumb. The flowers are long and tubular, about 2.5 cm long and are a pleasing blend of pink, orange and white.

Many Cape heaths, such as *Erica mollis*, are attractive because of the overall effect of masses of smallish flowers carried in large numbers on short lateral branches, but the large, shiny, blood-red flowers of *E. cruenta* (*cruentus* = blood-stained) (Fig. 3) are sufficiently striking to be admired for their individual beauty. This species is not a vigorous grower but can reach a height of about 1 m. As it occurs mainly at low altitudes in South Africa, its survival in the wild is threatened by agricultural development.



Fig. 3. *Erica cruenta* at Earlscliffe, Howth [E. C. Nelson].



Fig. 4. *Erica pageana* brightening a dark corner, Earlscliffe, Howth [D. Robinson].

*Erica pageana* (cover & Fig. 4) is one of the few yellow-flowered heathers in European cultivation. The colour is intensely bright and the flowers are slightly fragrant, although the scent will not appeal to everybody. The plant grows to 0.75–1 m high and is not long lived but like most of the heathers it is easily propagated. This species would not be suitable for cutting as the shock of sudden branch removal would probably be enough to kill the plant. This species occurs naturally in marshy areas and appears to be sensitive to summer drought in Ireland. Nevertheless, this remarkable plant is worth growing for garden decoration in mild areas.

Cape heaths may suffer in extremely severe winters such as those that occurred in 1946–1947, 1961–1962 and 1978–1979. But severe winters are widely spaced and there are some indications that winters are tending to become milder.

Many species would make ideal conservatory plants now that their need for good air movement and ventilation is better understood. How many of the 700-odd species of South African heathers would thrive outside in favourable areas in these islands is unknown. What is certain is that several of these supremely beautiful plants will grow well in mild coastal areas and deserve to be better known and more widely tested than they are at present.

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□ Dr David Robinson retired several years ago as Director of the Kinsealy Research Centre, County Dublin; he is an expert on chemical control of weeds.