

GROWING MEXICAN PLANTS IN CHICAGO GARDENS

BY PAUL C. STANDLEY
Associate Curator of the Herbarium

It is well known that many basic economic plants of the United States such as corn or maize, beans, cotton, and tobacco, besides peppers and other plants of minor importance, originated in Mexico. That country is the source also of many ornamental plants popular in North American gardens.

Early writers commented upon the fondness of Mexicans for flowers, as evinced by beautiful gardens that existed in the Valley of Anahuac. Flowers were grown extensively in the neighboring country, and brought in boat loads to the market. Aztec emperors established a botanical garden of rare plants from all parts of their realm.

Love of flowers is just as pronounced among the Mexicans today as four hundred years ago, and flowers are displayed as lavishly as ever in the markets. Even the humblest homes are almost always surrounded by gardens, with a great variety of flowers of the kinds esteemed before the coming of the Spaniards, and in addition many others from the Old World, as well as some, like the California poppy and gailardia, from the United States.

Some Mexican plants must have been in cultivation many centuries, for they are no longer known in a wild state. It is now decidedly uncertain whether some had their origin in Mexico or South America, for they seem to have been widely dispersed at the time of the conquest. Double-flowered forms, too, seem to have been as well established then as now.

Mexican plants most common in our gardens are cockscomb, bachelor's-button or globe amaranth (*Gomphrena*), four-o'clock, marigold, and zinnia. None of these grows at present in a really wild state. The zinnia is so popular in this region that it has been designated as the state flower of Indiana.

Other Mexican plants are cosmos in its various forms and colors, tuberose, spider-flower (*Cleome*), the poinsettia that fills florists' shops at Christmas time, some of the begonias and many of the popular cacti, perhaps some of the fuchsias (although these are mostly South American), moon vine, the lantana that is so popular in park beds, the lavender-purple ageratum, and, above all, the dahlias.

The poinsettia probably no longer exists in a wild state, but is a favorite shrub in Mexico and Central America. Those who know the poinsettia only as a potted plant can scarcely imagine its gorgeous effect when growing as a shrub or small tree.

The lantana as it grows wild is a weedy shrub in most parts of the American tropics, giving little promise as a decorative plant, for the bush is a coarse and straggling one, and the flowers are small and unattractive in color. Selective cultivation has improved it greatly. The inhabitants of tropical America regret that all the plants were not taken north, for they are pernicious weeds where native.

The ageratum, too, which is planted to form such handsome beds in some of the Chicago parks, is a despised weed in Mexico and Central America, where it behaves much like daisies or dog-fennel in the United States. When the native people are told that it is cultivated for ornament in the north they are greatly amused.

The truly wild dahlias of Mexico and Central America are far removed from the innumerable "improved" forms of our

gardens, but many are not inferior in beauty. They are all of the single type, and particularly beautiful are the large, pure white ones, the plants of which often become shrubs or small trees. They produce an especially handsome effect when banked along mountain roads and trails. In some parts of Central America where dahlias are cultivated abundantly but are not native, both single and double forms have become troublesome weeds, especially in corn fields.

Besides the plants enumerated, many other Mexican ones occasionally occur in

the gardens and greenhouses of Chicago. Some Mexican plants of notable beauty are highly prized in botanical gardens, but offer difficulties in propagation that prevent wider use.

Some of the best known Mexican plants are represented in the Hall of Plant Life (Hall 29) by accurate reproductions.

A loaf of bread baked in Egypt more than 3,000 years ago is exhibited among the collections of food plants and products in the Department of Botany.

PAINTING BY KNIGHT SHOWS STRANGE WINGLESS MOAS

BY BRYAN PATTERSON
Assistant in Paleontology

New Zealand is remarkable among the larger islands of the world for the fact that it possesses no native land mammals. This absence of mammals, particularly of the carnivorous forms, permitted the evolution of a number of peculiar flightless birds, of which the great majority are now extinct. The accompanying illustration depicts an evening scene in South Island and shows a number of the largest of these birds, *Dinornis maximus*, grouped about a small valley stream.

The members of the extinct order to which *Dinornis* belongs are known collectively as moas, a Maori name handed down from the time when the birds were hunted and eaten by the natives. Moas, to judge from the

were small and chestnut colored with a white tip. We owe this last piece of information to the excellent preservation, in dry caves in South Island, of specimens with the ligaments, dried skin and feathers still adhering to the bones.

The extinction of this once flourishing group seems to have been due to two causes. New Zealand, in common with other parts of the world, underwent a refrigeration of climate during the Pleistocene or glacial period. This reduction in temperature must have greatly reduced the number of moas. The survivors were exterminated by man. At various places on the islands have been found the so-called Maori ovens—old cooking pits where broken and charred moa bones and fragments of eggshell are mixed with stones and charcoal. The last moa



Copyright Field Museum of Natural History

Moas of New Zealand

One of the mural paintings by Charles R. Knight in Ernest R. Graham Hall. In a general way these huge wingless birds resembled the modern ostrich. Some reached a height of twelve feet.

immense numbers of their bones which have been found, were at one time exceedingly numerous. The remains of more than twenty species belonging to five genera have been distinguished. These ranged in size from the giant *Dinornis maximus*, which probably attained heights of ten feet, down to small species of *Anomalopteryx* which was not over three feet high.

The moas were entirely flightless and possessed only small vestiges of wings. They were ostrich-like in general appearance but the larger forms were relatively bulkier and had more massive legs. The feathers

was killed before the discovery of New Zealand by white men.

Before the coming of man the moas had natural enemies. Remains of a large eagle, *Harpagornis*, which doubtless preyed on the smaller species and on the young of the larger forms, have been found on both islands. The moas themselves fed on ferns.

The accompanying illustration has been taken from a mural by Charles R. Knight in Ernest R. Graham Hall (Hall 38). In the same hall are exhibited the skeleton of a small species of *Dinornis* and a life size restoration of *Dinornis maximus*.



Standley, Paul Carpenter. 1935. "Growing Mexican Plants in Chicago Gardens." *Field Museum news* 6(6), 3-3.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/25720>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/350936>

Holding Institution

Field Museum of Natural History Library

Sponsored by

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: In copyright. Digitized with the permission of the Chicago Field Museum.
For information contact dcc@library.uiuc.edu.

Rights Holder: Field Museum of Natural History

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.