

# Everlasting Flowers in Kew's Economic Botany Collection

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The delicacy, beauty and diversity of flowers makes them ideal vehicles for the most profound of human emotions, among them love, loss and gratitude. At the same time, and despite the intensity of feelings invested in them, cut flowers are transient, remaining alive for only a few days. This is most strikingly visible in the floral wreaths found draped over ancient Egyptian mummies, now withered and brown, once fresh and vividly coloured. These first came to public attention in 1881, when the Deir el-Bahri cache of royal mummies was discovered near Luxor. Here many considerably older mummies were hidden to avoid looting; the cache was sealed about 935 BC. Fortunately Georg Schweinfurth, the great German botanist of Africa, was in Cairo at the time of excavation, and was able to preserve and study the many wreaths found on the mummies. Schweinfurth dropped portions in water and found their original colour and flexibility could be, briefly, restored; he cut up other portions and sent them to the botanical museums of Europe, including Kew, where they remain today. Kew's collection was later enhanced by the much more complex wreaths found on Greco-Roman mummies by Sir Flinders Petrie. In both the Pharaonic and Greco-Roman periods these wreaths must have symbolised renewal or rebirth.

It is not surprising that in the nineteenth century the Victorians brought their ingenuity, and mastery of materials, to bear on the impermanence of plants and animals. A substantial industry produced an astonishing variety of taxidermy and artificial flowers, only now being rediscovered after many decades out of fashion. Kew's collection includes rice paper flowers, long made in China, and eagerly sought in Europe as trade opened up in the 1840s. These exquisite specimens are made from the pith of the rice paper plant, *Tetrapanax papyrifera*, which is soft and easily cut. Many more models were made in Britain from wax, still used for modelling in a few museums today. From the 1830s, companies such as Mintorn and Peachey sold finished materials, and also manuals and raw materials so that members of the public could make their own models for pleasure or profit.



Wax model of roses, purchased from Mrs Mintorn in 1899 for display in the Museum of Economic Botany (EBC 73044). Bryce Mathew Watts/© RBG Kew



Wax models were common in homes, but were also much used by museums. They were a way of showing fresh colours and shape in the era before colour photography or moving images. Kew's Museum of Economic Botany, home to the objects shown here, was founded in 1847 by Sir William Hooker. It displayed plant raw materials and products from around the world. The display cases were multimedia, containing dried plant materials, maps, photographs and, of course, wax models. Some were purely scientific in nature, such as the models of plant embryos made by Adolf and Friedrich Ziegler, but others must have been chosen for the colour and variety they brought to displays. Sir William was keenly aware of the need to maintain visual interest in his new Museum.

Ironically, these various replicas of flowers have proved nearly as evanescent as the real thing, as Victorian clutter and busy museum displays went out of favour in the 1930s. Artificial flowers are also extraordinarily fragile, and hard to repair if damaged. We are fortunate that Kew's archaeological and replica flowers have survived, through benign neglect and modern-day conservation, to inspire artists such as Rebecca Louise Law.



## Further reading

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Nigel Hepper. (2009). *Pharaoh's Flowers: the botanical treasures of Tutankhamun*. KWS, Chicago.

Sally McAleely. (2005). Flower arranging in Ancient Egypt? A new approach to archaeobotanical remains. Pages 105–120 in *Current Research in Egyptology*, ed. Kathryn Piquette & Serena Love. Oxbow Books, Oxford.

Ann B. Shteir. (2007). "Fac-similes of Nature": Victorian Wax Flower Modelling. *Victorian Literature and Culture* 35: 649–661.

John Whitenight. (2013). *Under glass: a Victorian obsession*. Schiffer, Atglen, PA.





Above and right: Chinese-made artificial chrysanthemums of rice paper (pith of *Tetrapanax papyrifera*), given in 1850 by John Reeves (EBC 71871). Andrew McRobb/© RBG Kew



Opposite: Portion of an ancient Egyptian wreath from the coffin of Ramesses II made of the leaves of *Mimusops schimperi* and sepals and petals of *Nymphaea lotus*, given by Georg Schweinfurth, 1883 (EBC 26683). Radiocarbon dating suggests this wreath was made when the mummy was hidden in the Deir el-Bahri cache, and is therefore about 3000 years old. Bryce Mathew Watts/© RBG Kew



Right: Sterile runners of peppermint (*Mentha x piperita*), rehydrated and pressed by Georg Schweinfurth, 1884. Found by the archaeologist Gaston Maspero in a XX to XXVI Dynasty (1200–600 BC) tomb at Thebes (EBC 26667). Bryce Mathew Watts/© RBG Kew