

## CARRION FLOWERS OF COROMANDEL

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## A B S T R A C

*Stapelia umbellata* Roxb. (Asclepiadaceae), a native species of Coromandel coast is described and its value as an ornamental is discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

It is well-known that Dr. William Roxburgh, the surgeon at Samalkota in Andhra Pradesh engaged himself in study of Flora of N. Circas. He surveyed the region lying between Madras and Visakhapatnam extending up to Eastern Ghats. Roxburgh described two Cactus-like succulents under *Stapelia* L., locally known as 'Kar allum' *Stapelia adscendens* Roxb. and *S. umbellata* Roxb. are common plants of rocky slopes at Simhachalam and Bhimunipatnam beach within 15 km distance of Visakhapatnam port. Though smaller than the African Carrion flowers (*S. gigantea* N. E. Br.) the umbel-flowered *Stapelia* is also attractive as an ornamental. Few plants were procured by Lady Clive and the species was introduced in Calcutta Botanic Garden. A dried herbarium specimen with ticket of HBC was preserved by N. Wallich who succeeded Roxburgh. It is a strange coincidence that present writers reintroduced the plant in Indian Botanic Garden, Calcutta, in the *Bicentenary year of Col. Robert Kyd*. The taxonomy, distribution and horticultural value of *Stapelia umbellata* Roxb. are given below.

**Caralluma umbellata** Haworth, Pl. Succ. 47, 1812; Gamble, Fl. Pres. Madras 861, 1923; Graveley & Mayurnathan in Bull. Madras Govt. Mus. 4 : 23, 1931; Ramamurthy & Razi, Fl. Bangalore 463, 1973; Saldanha & (presently the Central National Herbarium) Nicolson, Fl. Hassan 442, 1976; Matthew,

Fl. Tamil Nadu Carnatic 261, 1981. *Stapelia umbellata* Roxb., Pl. Coram. 3 : t. 241. 1819. *Boucerosia umbellata* Wight & Arn. Contrib. 34, 1834; Wight, Icon. Pl. Ind. Orient. t. 495, 1840; *B. campanulata* Wight, Icon. Pl. Ind. Orient. t. 1287, 1848; *B. lasiantha* (Wt.) N. E.Br. in Gard. Chr. 12 : 369, 1892.

Stems and branches erect, up to 30 cm high, herbaceous, 4-angled and succulent *ca* 2 cm across, angles crenate; leaves scaly, minute, cordate, solitary on the teeth of angular branches of young shoots. Umbel terminal, many-flowered (50-75); globose, 8-10 cm in diam., flowers *ca* 1.5 cm across, dark-purple. Sepals narrow *ca* 4 mm long; petals 5, campanulate, lobes triangular, inside dark brick red to purple, streaked within concentrically with many minute red, purple and yellow fine lines. Corona annular, adnate to the column, 5-lobed, lobes bifid, subulate, erect or spreading with a linear fleshy process on the inner face at the sinus, inflexed over the anther. Column stout; anther tips inappendiculate; pollen-masses one in each cell, subsessile, erect. Stigma flat, 5-angled, pearl white. Folicles slender, straight, terete each 12-15 cm. Fruiting peduncle *ca* 4 cm long, *ca* 2 mm in diam. Seeds many, comose, flat, *ca* 7 × 4 mm, winged.

*Fl.* : April to Aug.. *Fr.* : July to Oct.

*Distribution* : From sea-level to 1300 m., along East Coast of India and parts of Deccan.

*Specimens examined* : Andhra Pradesh : Chittor Dist., Palamaner, 2200 ft, 6.5.1923; C. E. C. Fischer 4789; Cuddapah Dist., Sompally, July 1884, J. S. Gamble 15201; Harsley Konda, 4000 ft, 26.5.1918. C. E. C. Fischer 4375.

Karnataka : Halebid, Mysore, 3000. ft., Nov. 1908, A. Meebold 9412; Shimoga 2-3000 ft, Oct. (fr.) 1908, A. Meebold 9413, Mandya Dist., Adichunchangiri, December 1978 (fr.). K. P. Sreenath & K. R. Krishnamurthy 5037; Bangalore Dist., Doddaballapur, 30th March 1978 (fr.). S. R. Ramesh 664.

Tamil Nadu : Coimbatore Dist., Tholampalaiyam, 1600 ft., April 1910, C. E. C. Fischer 1859; Lower Pulneys, 1600 ft., Sept. 1918 (fl. & fr.), G. Rodriguez 1940; Vanapalayam, 666 m, April 1956, K. Subramanyam 22; Madurai Dist., Murugumalai 333 m, Sept. 1961, K. M. Sebastine 12993; North Arcot, Tippukadu 165 m, June 1963, K. Ramamurthy 16603; Salem Dist., Attur, Pachamalais, Narippadi, 400 m, July 1978, K. M. Matthew & N. Venugopal 15629; Dharampuri, Hogainakkal, 600 m, April 1979 (fl.) K. M. Matthew & N. Venugopal 23074; Kanyakumari Dist., Purathimalai, January 1978 (fr.), A. N. Henry 53319.

#### *Cultivated* :

Maharashtra, Ganesh Khind, B. Garden, Kirkee, Poona, May 1908, N. P. Paranjape s. n.

*Notes* : Though W. Roxburgh collected the Indian Carrion flowers and described it under *Stapelia* L. in his Coromandel plants, the plant

supplied to Haworth has been described as *Caralluma*. The flowers of *S. umbellata* Roxb. are 'foetid scented' like the African Carrion flowers. Roxburgh did not keep herbarium specimens as he engaged local artists of Kakinada, Godavari Dist. to make coloured drawings which remain unpublished even after 200 years. Lady Clive, who shifted her residence from Madras to Calcutta was a garden lover and obtained live plants from Mysore (Halebid).

The plant is very gregarious in dry rocky places in South India. Almost all pilgrimage centres like Simhachalam, Tirupati, Rishi valley, Halebid, Shimoga, Madurai, and Kanyakumari are the habitats of this native ornamental succulent. The 'Bonsai-like' plants are easy to cultivate and propagate from stems. Blooming is reported to be neither regular every year nor there is any special study of its cultivation from seeds.

*Vernacular* : Telugu : 'Karu Allam' (Bitter ginger); Kannada : 'Vaddara magate' Tamil : 'Sirun kalli' (Small cactus).

*Uses* : It is a medicinal plant of ayurvedic system. The generic name *Caralluma* is derived from Telugu vernacular name. The tender shoots of *C. adscendens* Roxb. are reported to be eaten raw though they are bitter.

As the Tamil name indicates 'Sirunkalli' it is treated as a native 'Small Cactus' by common people. The species has been introduced to horticulture as an ornamental succulent long ago. The plant was grown at Ganeshkind Garden, Poona and also at Kathmandu (in Nepal).