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Elephants in the Plant World

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Cover Page Footnote

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Elephantiasis is a name given to various skin diseases of man which cause it to look like an elephant's hide, and to the swollen condition of lower appendages accompanied with hardening of the skin caused by blockage of the lymphatic system by a minute roundworm, *Wuchereria bancrofti*.

Composite monsters or *makaras*, that have elephant heads and bodies of serpents, alligators or fishes, are common in the architecture of India and the Far East. The mythology behind these wonder beasts cannot be dealt with here, but a Burmese poet's theatric explanation of an elephant head and fish body, or

ichthyoproboscidea, was a comparison of a battlefield full of elephants to a sea teeming with sharks and fishes, an analogy difficult for the Western mind to comprehend.

Elephantine, the adjective meaning anything elephant-like, refers also to its movements, which are described in dictionaries as clumsy, ponderous and heavy. Now, any elephant tracker knows that an elephant can walk softly as a cat and long ago an Indian poet said the walk of an elephant was reminiscent of the movements of a graceful woman . . . or was it the other way around?

ELEPHANTS IN THE PLANT WORLD

by Dale J. Osborn

Beastly names from all branches of the animal kingdom are attached to members of the plant world. Familiar to most of us are toad stool, cranes bill, moth orchid, tiger lily, skunk cabbage, fox glove, lobster claws, butterfly bush, bird of paradise, mother-in-law plant, hen and chickens, kangaroo paws, octopus plant, bear grass, monkey puzzle tree and many more.

First among animals whose names have been applied botanically is the elephant, be it African or Asian. Following are some of the less obscure "elephant plants" of the world.

Elephant is symbolic of size or strength, hence, elephant garlic and elephant pepper in India. The baobab (*Adansonia digitata*) of tropical Africa, which can have a trunk diameter of 30 feet, is for obvious reasons, called the elephant tree. Elephant apple or wood (*Faronia elephantum*), a large East Indian tree, yields strong, durable timber.

In the short summer of the North American subarctic and alpine meadows a small perennial, (*Pedicularis groenlandicus*) bears a 2 - 6 inch spike of red flowers resembling elephant's heads, trunk and all. A related species (*P. atollens*) of the high mountains of California and Oregon, lacks the trunk of the above and is known as little elephant's head.

Plants with large and/or assymetrical leaves that are called elephant's ears are encyclopaedic. Most familiar of these are species of *Begonia*, *Caladium*, *Philodendron* and *Alocasia*, which are popular house plants. One Indonesian elephant ear, *Colocasia esculenta*, has leaves up to three feet in length. Two species of fern having undivided fronds, *Elaphoglossum crinitum* and *Platyserium angolense*, also bear the common name elephant's ear.

Trees with short, thickened and crooked trunks, reminiscent of an elephant's proboscis, are elephant wood, *Veatchia* (*Pachycormus*) *discolor*, of Baja California and the elephant tree, *Burserea* (*Elaphrium*) *microphylla* of the Southwestern and Lower California Deserts.

Tusk-like features on plants, such as the large, spreading thorns of the East Indian *Acacia tomentosa*, prompted the name elephant thorn. Elephant tusk (*Martynia altheaefolia*), a small perennial of the Colorado Desert, was named from the tiny curved prongs on the pod.

The ivory tree (*Combretum imberbe*) of Africa has whitish or ivory bark, and the leaves of the ivory fig (*Ficus eburnea*) of Asia have white midribs. The ivory nut is the hard seed of the South American palm, *Phytelephas macrocarpa*.

Vegetable ivory of commerce is obtained from the latter and an African fan palm, *Hyphaene thebaica*.

Elephant's foot (*Dioscorea elephantipes*) is a South African yam having a broad surface tuber that may grow to nine feet in diameter. Another elephant foot, *Testudinaria elephantipes* of Asia, develops enormous corms. The elephant foot tree (*Beaucarnia recurvata*) of Mexico has the trunk swollen at the base as does the elephant or palmyra palm (*Borassus flabellifera*) of tropical Asia.

In the sandy pinelands of South Carolina, Florida and Texas there is elephant's foot (*Elephantopus carolinianus*). The genus, which also occurs in Asia, was a translation by Linnaeus in 1753 from the Aboriginal vernacular. With imagination, its flat, basal rosette of leaves resembles the track of an elephant.

A number of food plants are prefixed with elephant. The most accurately latinized name in this group is elephant's root (*Elephantorrhiza elephantina*), which was discovered by Burchell in 1812 from information supplied him by the Bechuanas. One of the most important "elephant's food" is *Portulacaria afra*, a small tree or bush having juicy leaves and found in the drier parts of Africa.

The popular Sausage Tree (*Kigelia pinnata*), which bears long, pendulous, sausage-like fruits, is called elephant corn by the Zulus. There are numerous elephant grasses (*Pennisetum purpureum* of the African Savannah is one of the better known), all of which grow as high as or higher than an elephant's eye. The common Old World cat-tail (*Typha elephantina*), is called elephant grass in India.

Mopane (*Colophospermum mopane*), a low tree or shrub of the African bush, and a favorite food of elephants, provides such camouflage that they cannot be seen from a few feet away. Elephant privet (*Ptelopsis habeensis*), a low tree of Nigeria, also provides concealment for elephants.

There is one elephant cactus, a globular Mexican species known as *Coryphantha* (*Mammillaria*) *elephantidens*.

Nothing has been named for the elephant's eye, but *Vellozid retinervis* of South Africa with its fibrous stems and terminal tufts of leaves does appear to have been named appropriately, elephant's tail.