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Proteas by H.E.Bates



With the rise in popularity of flower arranging there has been a corresponding increase in popularity of various unusual flowers. Probably the most remarkable of these is the vast and strange protea family.

The name protea comes from the mythical Greek god Proteus, who could transform himself into any shape, and it is an almost bewildering number of shapes that we find in the proteas, from the globe artichoke form of many species to others looking like large pincushions.

The proteas, though a large enough family in themselves, have also a lot of near relatives. Probably the best known of these and certainly one of the most beautiful is the Waratah (botanically Telopea speciosissima) the national emblem of New South Wales

The grevilleas also belong to the protea family and they too are pretty numerous, being very widely distributed in Australia. The bright yellow Silky Bark Oak, the largest of the family, is a near-protea relative. The Sugar Bushes and Silver Trees are also related. One of the commoner Sugar Bushes is so full of honey that early settlers used to boil it up into a thick nectar for fruit preserving.

The Silver Trees are of great and delicate beauty. They are not at all unlike certain species of eucalyptus, though they are infinitely more silver. 'Grey satin' has been used to describe the leaves which cluster thickly on upright branches and give, even under the slightest breeze, a shimmering effect.

Still other relatives are the genus Leptospermum and it is these that give the pincushion shapes. Yet another relation is the bottle-brush family, not to be confused with the well known and very attractive Australian family of that name. These bottle-brushes have the botanical name of Mimulus, which comes from the Greek mimos, a mimic.

Proteas are not only widely distributed horizontally but vertically too. One of them, *P. villimandscharica*, grows at a height of 9,000-11,000 feet. They also vary a good deal in stature, from a height of a foot or two to 12 or 15 feet.

Great variations in colour are also to be found in the proteas. The range goes from white to yellow and through to pink and crimson and even black.

Having lavished much praise on this vast and absorbing family it is only right to add they are not hardy in this country. I should however imagine that only a little glass protection would be enough to ensure their survival in all but the fiercest of our winters. The only drawback about this is the size to which many proteas will grow. I once grew that glorious orange and scarlet beauty, Streptosolen jamesonii, under glass. Ravishing though it was it took such possession of the greenhouse that within two years it was a question of either it or the greenhouse.

However it is now possible to buy protea flowers, which dry beautifully and will splendidly embellish dried-flower arrangements. © Evensford Productions Limited, 1972.