Passionflower: Christian Curiosity, Exotic Vine, Tropical Fruit

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Introduction

Embedded in the very name of the passionflower is a suggestion of the exotic. Native to the Neotropics, the passionflower first entered Western cultural consciousness upon its discovery in the forests of Brazil by Spanish colonists who saw symbols of the passion of Christ in its strange morphology. The passionflower proliferated as a Christian symbol in Renaissance Europe, and became secularized in Victorian England, when it was absorbed by the cultural phenomenon of the “language of flowers” and the era’s exuberant floral aesthetic. Cultivated varieties of the passionflower multiplied in Victorian hothouses that aimed to recreate the flowers’ tropical habitat in microcosm. Today there are over five hundred species of the genus *Passiflora*, and over four hundred hybrid forms that have been artificially produced under cultivation. Passionflowers represent the diversity and dynamism of the natural world, with curling and climbing tendrils, evanescent flowers, and shape-shifting leaves. Though named by Europeans for its symbolic representation of the Passion of Christ, the passionflower has also symbolized fervor and exoticism and has been cultivated worldwide for its medicinal properties and charismatic fruits.

Passiflora varieties illustrated in...

Indigenous Uses

From the Tupi people of Amazonia to the Algonquian of the Chesapeake region, Indigenous peoples harvested passionflowers as medicinal and culinary plants long before the arrival of Europeans to the Americas. Archaeological research suggests evidence of human consumption of *Passiflora incarnata* as early as the Late Archaic period (c.1000 BCE) in what is now the southeastern United States.[1] The Cruz-Badiano Codex—a 1552 Aztec herbal—likely contains the oldest extant description of a passionflower: coanenepilli or "serpent's tongue" in Nahuatl.[2] Subsequent sixteenth-century ethnobotanical works recorded the Nahua people's use of *coanenepilli* root as a diuretic and purgative.[3]

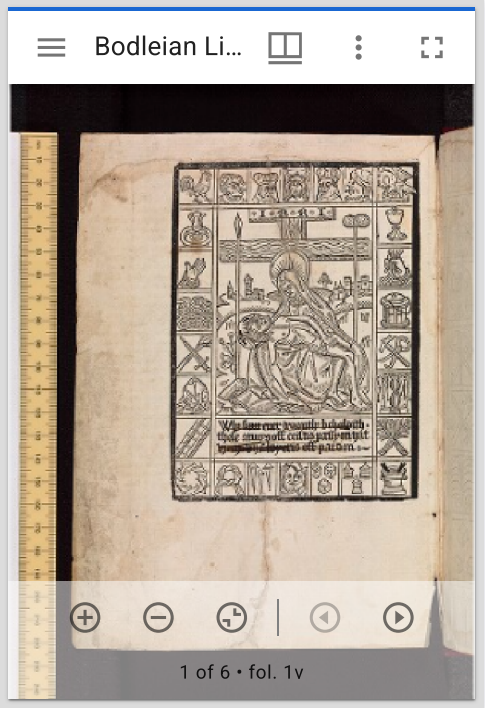
Passionflower or Coanenipilli in...

By the mid-sixteenth century, Spanish accounts of the Americas first described this unfamiliar group of plants in European terms. The Spanish conquistador, Pedro Cieza de Leon, wrote of delicious *granadillas* or "little pomegranates" growing near Cali, in contemporary Colombia, in his Chronicle of Peru in the 1550s.[4] At the early Jamestown settlement in the British Virginia Colony, Captain John Smith's 1607–09 diary described the use of *Passiflora incarnata* in indigenous horticulture. The Powhatan people, he wrote, plant "*Maracocks* a wild fruit like a lemmon, which also increase infinitely: they begin to ripe in September and continue till the end of October."[5]

400 Year Old Nut Shells and Seeds Recovered from a Well at...

Passion of Christ in a Flower

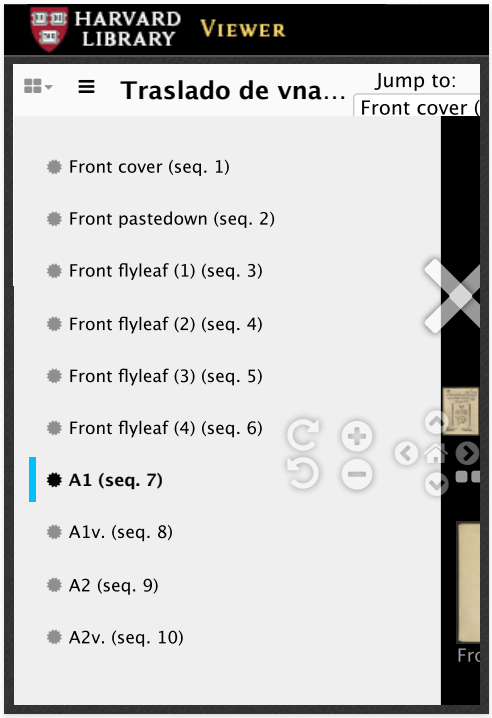
While many plants in the *Passiflora* genus offer edible fruits, it was their flower that enchanted Europeans across their global empires in the seventeenth century and gave rise to the plants' modern name. In 1590, a Spanish Jesuit missionary, José de Acosta, wrote that the granadilla flower was locally "esteemed" for having the "emblems of the Passion," as "the nails, the pillar, the lashes, the Crown of Thorns, and the wounds" were seen in its physiology.[6] Acosta's comparison referred to the Christian Gospels' "Arma Christi" or "Instruments of the Passion": the objects involved in Jesus's final suffering, crucifixion, and death preceding his resurrection. These objects—such as the column of Jesus' flagellation or the nails of the crucifixion—were metonyms of Jesus in late medieval and early modern art and material culture.[7] The botanist, Nicolás Monardes, attested to a similar plant to Acosta's in 1574, and in 1608, a group of Jesuits or Augustinians presented Pope Paul V with a dried specimen of the flower whose individual parts resembled the instruments of the passion. By the early seventeenth century, pamphlets across the Spanish Empire wrote of the "Flower of the Passion."



Early seventeenth-century religious works elucidated the symbolism contained within the flower's morphology. In 1609 in Bologna, Simone Parlasca published *The Flower of the Granadiglia, or of The Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, which compiled prose, poetry, and woodcut and copper engravings depicting the plant. Giovanni Rossi's illustrations did as much to popularize its Christian symbolism as did written descriptions: they depicted an exaggerated passionflower plant whose coronal filaments form Jesus' Crown of Thorns and whose stylized stigmas resemble the three nails that pinned him to the cross.[8] Though the most common passionflower species have trifoliate leaves, the Bolognese illustrations picture oval leaves, which subsequent illustrations often emulated. One Jesuit polemicist assessed in 1610 that the plant's leaves are shaped like the "point of the lance that pierced through the side of Christ our Lord."[9] Other seventeenth-century contemporaries identified the flower's five stamens with the wounds Jesus suffered on the cross, inspiring another early name for the flower: la Flor de las cinco llagas, or "Flower of the Five Wounds."[10]

A Natural Wonder for the Global Church

Catholics within Europe and across growing European empires conceived of the passionflower both as a natural wonder and a mystery of the faith, which inspired piety and licensed the Church's global conquest. In a 1609 pamphlet written during Spain's attempted invasion and Christianization of Cambodia, the anonymous author included a woodcut of the flower, describing the flowers as "flowers of the ineffable mystery," and natural "wonders" that demonstrated God's love to the sinner. The author assessed that "such beautiful flowers Christ wanted to give us, that in paradise he does not give better ones, because he treats the sinner with love." He concluded, "see if it will be a pledge of love with reason, because God entrusts his passion in it so that his sacred renown might be grasped... God is a gardener of the sacred flowers which no human cultivates. So come, Christians, for it is not righteous to conceal such a wonder, but rather it is seen that God wants the soil to become Heaven."[11] With these words, the author expressed a reverence rooted in the natural world that lent credence to Spain's violent crusade to spread Catholicism in Southeast Asia. By enthralling the "popular curiosity" with the passionflower, these religious pamphlets were an "effective instrument for the diffusion of the evangelical message of the Jesuits."[12]



With its new Christian symbolism, the American flower assimilated into the visual culture of early modern Europe. In a painting of the *Madonna and Child* (1530–35) by the Flemish artist Joos van Cleve, the infant Jesus scrambles away from two red flowers held in his mother's hand: a carnation and a passionflower. The carnation, with its petals colored a deep blood-red and its stem and flower-head shaped like a nail, is symbolic of the crucifixion and passion of Christ. When compared to the carnation, the depiction of the passionflower is not naturalistic, but stylized and distinct. It is likely the passionflower depicted here was not painted from life but rather "from rumour."[13] The flower bears a strong resemblance to the stylized form represented in the anonymous woodcut discussed above, making it likely that it was copied from this, or another, early European representation of the flower. Yet, this painting is curious: it pre-dates by a few decades the proliferation of the flower—and any information or printed illustrations representing it—in Europe.[14] Monardes's description of the flower in 1574, and the later representations by the Jesuits in 1608, are the earliest accounts of the passionflower in Europe. Joos van Cleve would surely have never set eyes upon, or even heard about, the passionflower during his lifetime.[15] How, then, did the passionflower come to be in this painting?

Joos van Cleve's *Madonna and Chil...*

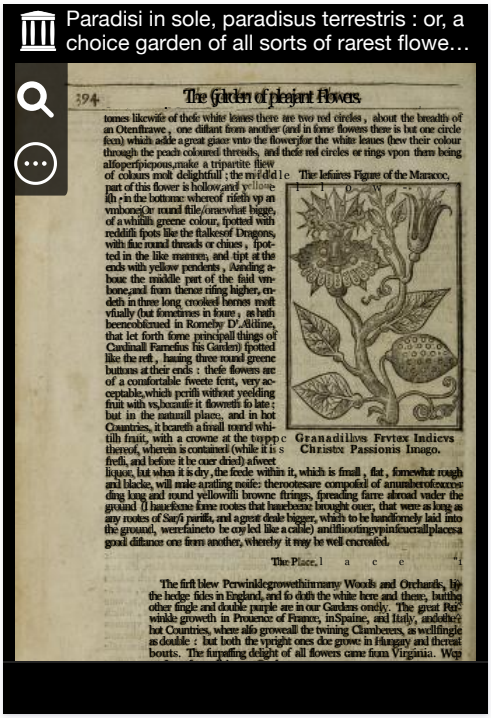
It is likely that the passionflower was added to the painting by a different artist around a hundred years after Joos van Cleve completed it. Andy Haslit, curator at the Cincinnati Art Museum where the painting is held, described that a “black background was painted around the carnation, [and] the passionflower was painted right on top of the black.” [16] The painted passionflower grows out from the top of the carnation, as a sort of “updated” counterpart to the carnation, or a New World manifestation of Christ’s passion. It is impossible to know exactly why the passionflower was added to the painting, but in its layers of added paint, Christian narratives that were read into the natural world accumulate in the painting. The contrast between the naturalistic representation of the carnation, a native of the Mediterranean flora, and the stylized passionflower, native to South America, represents the symbolic potency of the passionflower before its mysterious and exoticized existence was supplanted by real flowers brought into European gardens.

Joos van Cleve’s *Madonna and Chil…*

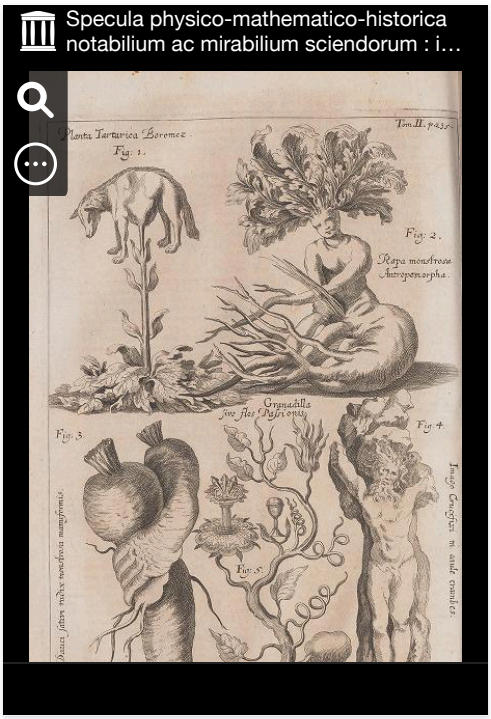
It was this natural history of wonder—rather than economic botany—that brought fame to the passionflower across seventeenth-century Europe. Jesuit mystic and theologian Juan Eusebio Nieremberg depicted the bud of the passionflower as the Holy Grail in his book devoted to the natural history of faraway lands. For Nieremberg, each species might “reveal the enigmas of divine wisdom,” since the “mysteries of sacred history were written in nature” and its wonders like the passionflower.[17] By inscribing European symbolism and cosmologies into the flower, Christian naturalists and missionaries rendered the American plant not only a material possession, but a spiritual or “imaginary possession” of Europe.[18]

Passionflower in Early Modern Botany

Others were skeptical of the Jesuits' belief that the flower held esoteric meaning. Even José de Acosta had admitted when he first documented the symbolic interpretation that "some piety is necessary to help it appear, but much is well expressed" in the flower.[19] British herbalist, John Parkinson, though Catholic, impugned the "superstitious Jesuite" and their professed symbolism, warning that "God never willed his Priests to instruct his people with lyes."[20] By the first two decades of the seventeenth century, *Passiflora incarnata* (Maypop) and *caerulea* (blue passionflower) grew in Paris, Rome, and London.[21] Faced with real passionflowers growing in Rome in 1625, an Italian botanist similarly struggled to see the Arma Christi.[22] These botanists' works were often accompanied by more realist botanical illustrations over the stylized popular woodcuts.



Still, both religious and scientific works nourished the flower's myth into the eighteenth century. An encyclopedia of mathematics and natural history published by the German Johann Zahn in 1696 mimicked Nieremberg's stylized illustration of the passionflower on the page featuring popular and scientific wonders of early modern Europe, including the anthropomorphic mandrake and the "Boromez" plant that purportedly grew live sheep as its fruit.[23] Though the Jesuit interpretation of the passionflower emanated from Iberian colonies, the mythic illustrations also circulated in North American colonies. In a manuscript cataloging the natural history of French Canada at the end of the seventeenth century, the Jesuit author sketched just two species not native to the region: the unicorn and the passionflower, clearly imitating Nieremberg's woodcut.[24] When Carl Linnaeus catalogued species and standardized plant taxonomy in 1753, he identified 24 species in the genus *Passiflora*, ensuring the plant's Jesuit legacy would live on in the age of Linnean botany. He named *Passiflora incarnata*—the species cultivated by the Powhatan in Virginia—as the genus's type species.[25]



The Language of the Passionflower

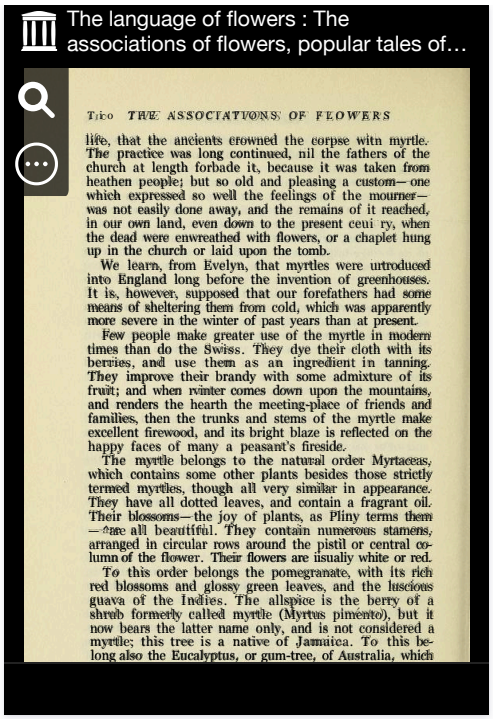
The symbolic resonance of the passionflower on the European continent did not translate fully to the Anglican Protestant world and the cultural milieu of Victorian England. The linguistic use of the word passion can be traced through the parallel trajectory of the passionflower's symbolic meaning in England. As a reference to the sufferings of Christ from Old English, passion as a qualifier of emotionality originated in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Still, the popularity of its use as a general term rose significantly in the eighteenth century.[26] Today, English-language speakers tend to think primarily of the emotional meaning of passion. This shift occurred during the Victorian era, evidenced in the uptick of passionflowers in decorative arts, poetry, and colloquialisms.

From *Passion Flowers* by Mary...

The increasing interest in the decorative uses and malleable symbolism of the passionflower was part of a larger craze for exotic plants in Victorian England that was paired with the idea of the Language of Flowers. The origin of the Language of Flowers is credited to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who alluded to a "Turkish love letter" while traveling in Constantinople between 1716 and 1718.[27] The language was based on associated meanings of plants. While not an immediate cultural phenomenon, floriographies aimed at upper-class women began to be commonly printed in Victorian England about a century after Montagu's letters. These floral dictionaries were based on the French Langage des Fleurs published in 1819 by Madame Charlotte de Latour.[28] Given the Victorians' hunger for symbolisms of all kinds, the existing tale of the passionflower made a natural entry into floriographies, as well as naturalistic decorative arts looking to showcase a broad range of plants that could, if one looked hard enough, contain secret meanings.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689...

In Anne Pratt and Thomas Miller's mid-nineteenth-century floriography, The Language of Flowers: The Associations of Flowers, Popular Tales of Flowers, the passionflower is described exotically as "hanging in beautiful festoons about the venerable trees of the American forests."[29] It is noted only for its Christian symbolism, and no alternate symbol is offered. However, the entry seems to be more of a "popular tale" than an accepted element of the Victorian "secret language." Pratt and Miller write snidely about the Spanish Jesuit's floral reach of the imagination: "To their enthusiastic imaginations, the different parts of the blossoms figured the number of the Apostles, the rays of glory, the nails, the hammer— those sad signs of the Saviour's passion ! and the sight of this wonderful symbol in the far-off wilderness, was to them an assurance of conquests which were to be effected under the name of religion." To Pratt and Miller, the passionflower's symbolism is far-fetched and requires, as they put it, an "enthusiastic imagination." They use this story to critique the colonial Jesuit enterprise, saying: "More anxious to promote their own peculiar doctrines of faith, and to ensure a temporal dominion, than to exemplify the spirit of Him whom they profess to follow, the very men who beheld in a flower of the forest an emblem of love—an emblem for faith to rest upon—carried misery wherever they raised their standard."[30] This quote, however, is less a critique of colonialism than of the Jesuits themselves, suggesting that the Jesuits are not properly acting in the name of God. This difference of religion is ultimately what weakened the Christian symbolism of the passionflower as it was popularized in England.



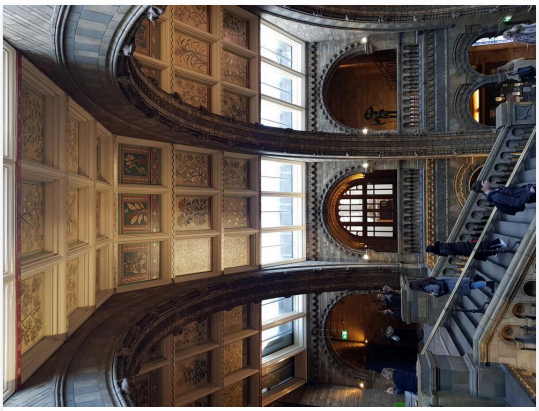
The Passionflower in the Decorative Arts

The Language of Flowers inspired a greater inclusion of plants in decorative arts, such as in masonry, decorative paneling and painting, and textile and pattern design. A notable high Victorian style church, St. Mary's in Stratfield Mortimer, includes passionflowers among its many naturalistic carvings and serves as an excellent example of the passionflower in sacred stonework. Built in the 1860s, the church is thought to be influenced by the Victorian's culture adopting the Language of Flowers.[31] Though many symbolic plants and flowers are depicted within and without the church, passionflowers decorate the responds of the chancel arch. Unlike earlier, continental portrayals of the passionflower, these stone passionflowers are, with some grace for the medium, botanically accurate without going to any lengths of fancifulness to emphasize the Christ symbolism.

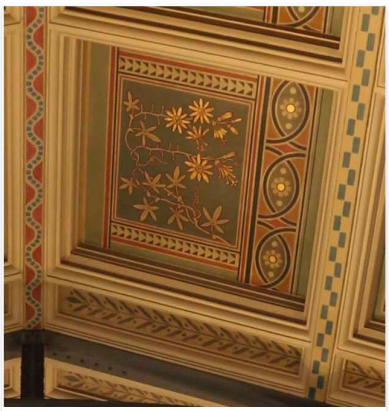

St. Mary's respond of chancel arch with passionflowers....

Perhaps the most famous instance of passionflowers in Victorian decorative arts are those on the ceiling of Hintze Hall in London's Natural History Museum (opened 1881). The ceiling is composed of 162 panels painted in the Arts and Crafts style and is meant to emphasize the botanical undercurrents of the British empire. The idea for the panels is credited to Alfred Waterhouse, while they were painted in situ by Charles James Lea. Hintze Hall was intended to showcase the wonders of the empire, especially those plants with economic value, such as tobacco or cotton; exotics like the passionflower were included as well.[32]

Hintze Hall. Image source: Wikimedia...



Hintze Hall panels. Image source:...



Ceiling panel showing...

Another notable display of passion flowers is at the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew. Marianne North was a painter who combined modes of landscape painting and botanical illustration into her artistry. She was an unmarried Victorian woman who traveled the empire alone after the age of 40 and had an insatiable curiosity for tropical plants.[33] North was especially interested in the environmental adaptation of the specimens she painted. Today, over 800 of her paintings live in the Marianne North Gallery at the Kew where, for the better part of the past century, they were the only permanent solo exhibition of works by a woman.[34] Several of her paintings feature the passionflower, which she encountered throughout her travels, from Jamaica to Brazil to India and South Africa. In her autobiography, North makes no mention of the Christian symbolism of the passionflower but focuses on the morphology of the plant and the deliciousness of its fruit which, she notes, makes for a most refreshing treat amid oppressive summer heat.[35]

Flowers and Fruit of...

Two Climbing...

Besides these public, impressive locations, passionflowers were also present in the domestic sphere through textile and porcelain designs. Richard Ovey, the leading furniture fabric purveyor in the early nineteenth century, sold a cotton titled “The Scarlet Ground White Passion Flower Chintz.”[36] Manchester calico manufacturer.[37] Samuel Matley and Sons also sold an upholstery cotton decorated with passionflowers.[38] As for porcelain, Coalport Porcelain, a leading brand of porcelain throughout the nineteenth century, produced a passionflower plate design painted by Thomas Pardoe, a notable painter of birds and flowers on porcelain. The presence of passionflowers in these widely available fabrics and porcelain illustrates the extent to which passionflowers became a common motif in nineteenth-century decorative arts. Passionflowers joined the many exotic flowers sprawling over Victorian pattern-crazed homes, adding to the gaudy and saturated aesthetic of the age.

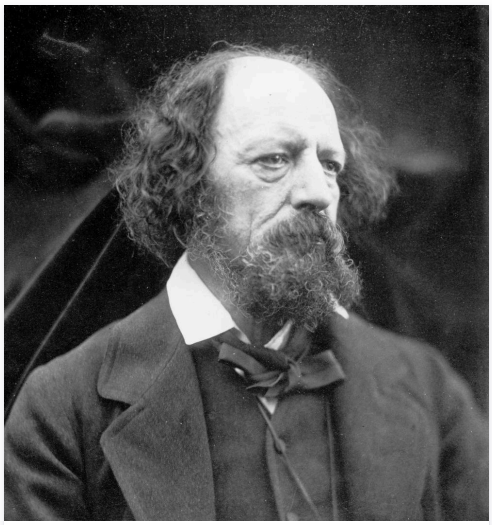
Richard Ovey...

Samuel Matley and Sons, image credit:...

The Passionflower in Victorian Poetry

The Victorian interest in allegory and symbolism translated well to poetry. Published in 1855, Lord Alfred Tennyson’s Maud and Other Poems contains a series of lyrics about a hysterical man who is pained by the unrequited love he feels for Maud. During a ball, he is waiting in the garden, knowing that Maud’s favored suitor dances with her inside. So sets up the famous line, Come into the garden, Maud. In section XXII.10, Tennyson writes:

> *There has fallen a splendid tear/ From the passion-flower at the gate./ She is coming, my dove, my dear;/ She is coming, my life, my fate;/ The red rose cries, ‘She is near, she is near;’/ And the white rose weeps, ‘She is late;’/ The larkspur listens, ‘I hear, I hear;’/ And the lily whispers, ‘I wait.’*[39]



Alfred Tennyson, photographed by...

Tennyson’s poem marks a semantic shift in the use of the word passion. It is clear that, placed among roses, lilies, and violets, the passionflower is not serving as a Christ-symbol. Rather, it was by this point an ornamental vine common in English gardens, and more, the name of passionflower aligns with a certain desperation in the protagonist’s narration.

Several volumes of Tennyson's work were illustrated by his close friend, the pioneering Victorian photographer Julia Margaret Cameron. "Fanciful" photographs became common in the Victorian era and often depicted biblical allegories or classical tales.[40] Cameron has two photographs surrounding "the passionflower at the gate" that feature wistful women dressed in white. The innocent, virgin beauty showcased in these photos alters the literal meaning of Tennyson's "passionflower." The woman becomes the passionflower—or an extension of its symbolic value. While Maud is absent from Tennyson's garden, Cameron places the figure of desire into her photographs. Through Cameron and Tennyson's work, we can see the passionflower of the Victorians becoming related to sensuality. The "enthusiastic imaginations" of the Jesuits noted by Pratt and Miller added an element of curiosity to the already exotic-looking morphology of the passionflower.

The passionflower at the gate, 186...

The Diversity of Passionflowers

Since Linnaeus' classification, the known diversity of passionflowers has grown considerably: passionflowers encompass plant life forms that are visual, olfactory, dynamic, and malleable. The proliferation of the flower over evolutionary time represents the numerous and intimate entanglements of the plant with its predators, pollinators, and rainforest habitats. The flowers of *Passiflora mucronata*, for instance, are pollinated by bats and open at night in as little as fifteen seconds to release an odor that smells somewhat like pumpkin, fresh beans, or lemon cake.[41] The common names of passionflowers indicate their diversity of forms: "moon-shaped-leaved" (*P. murucuza*), "bat-winged" (*P. vespertilio*), "cork-barked" (*P. suberosa*), "square-stalked" (*P. quadrangularis*), "laurel-leaved" (*P. laurifolia*), "apple-fruited" (*P. maliformis*), and even, "sea-anemone-like" (*P. actinia*).[42]

Illustrations o...

Illustration of sea...

Photo of *Passiflora actinia*, the sea-anemone...

In his painting, *Hummingbird and Passionflowers* (ca. 1875–1885), Martin Johnson Heade conveys a sense of the natural world as dynamic and evolving. The passionflowers (*Passiflora racemosa*) are depicted in close association with their tropical habitat and hummingbird pollinators. These striking red flowers, set against the backdrop of thunderous skies, infuse the tropical landscape with drama and allure. The entwining and climbing stems of the plant loop around the birds and the other arboreal branches of the rainforest canopy, bringing them gently into its tangle. The flowers' curling tendrils are perplexing, quite literally: perplex, from the Latin *plexus*, means interwoven, entangled, involved, intricate, plaited.

Martin Johnson Heade's...

Passionflower vines form a crucial part of the co-evolutionary enmeshments of the rainforest canopy. Many passionflowers are entangled in close relationships with longwing butterflies (heliconiids) whose caterpillars feed on their leaves. Zebra longwings have developed a resistance to chemicals in the plant's leaves that discourages other insects from eating them. Not only are these butterflies able to eat passionflower leaves but they also internalize the poisons for their own ends, making themselves toxic to birds.

Illustration of a zebra longwing...

Yet passionflowers are not as immobile and defenseless as they might appear to human eyes and senses of time. The shapes of passionflower leaves, for instance, are some of the most malleable and diverse among plants: in some cases, their leaves can vary and mutate along a single vine, mimicking nonhost plants and discouraging butterflies from laying eggs on them.[43] The deceit does not stop here: many passionflowers have structures on their leaves, such as little nubs or yellow spots, that mimic the appearance and arrangement of butterfly eggs and so deter longwings from laying eggs on leaves that appear to be occupied. Some even display structures that mimic the eggs of the longwing's predators. In addition, nectar-producing glands on the leaves can be utilized to attract ants and wasps, which in turn attack the longwing caterpillars.[44]

Illustration of *Passiflora alata* (or, th...

Bees have a far less complicated relationship with passionflowers. As Francis Channing Woodworth describes in her book *Wonders of the Insect World* (1853), "the nectar in the passion flower has an intoxicating effect" upon bees: "they now and then indulge in excessive drinking [...] one may see half a dozen of these poor creatures lying on the ground, near the goblet which has so grossly intoxicated them, and entirely unable to stir an inch." [45] This sprawling scene of inebriated bees places the passionflower not with notions of divine sacrifice and purity, but with indulgence, pleasure, and excess.

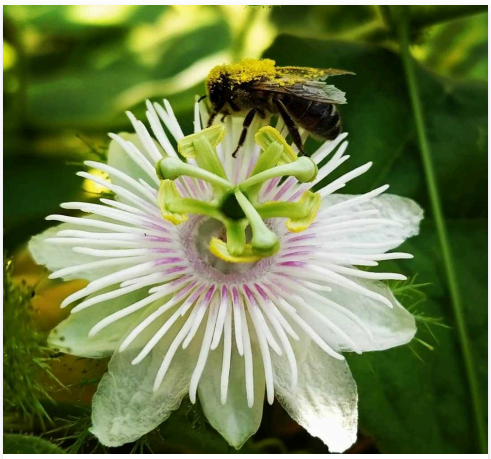


Photo of *Passiflora foetida* with a b...

Passionflowers Under Cultivation

Passionflowers have seduced bees and gardeners alike: the vigorous climbers have been adopted into cultivation in European gardens as striking, curious, and strange representations of South America's tropical forests. The allure of the passionflower to the gardener is represented in Asa B. Strong's *American Flora* (1846–1850), where the plant is described as "the produce of South America and the West Indies, where the dense forests are filled with their numerous species, climbing over shrubs and trees, and bearing flowers of the most curious form of striking beauty."[46]

Illustration of *The Blu*...

A pressed...

The artificial cultivation of these far-away rainforests, and the lush exoticism they came to represent, was often achieved under glass in hothouses, or stoves, and heated greenhouses. As one nineteenth-century periodical writes, passionflowers "attain greatest perfection planted out into good soil, in a hot-house, where its branches can be trained around a pillar, or under the roof, or over any trellis."[47] In another publication, readers are encouraged to "allow the blooming shoots to hang about in festoons."[48] The addition of tropical climbers to the hothouse made "the walls themselves constitute an extensive and eccentric garden."[49] These jungles under glass were intended to recreate the heat and humidity of tropical forests in lavish microcosm.

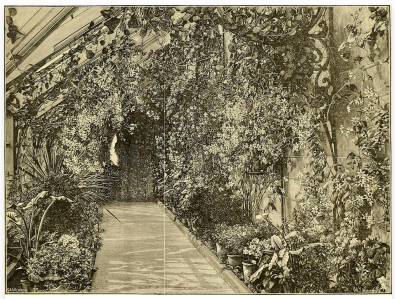
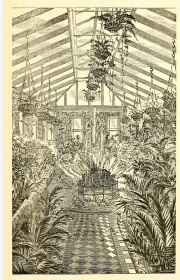


Illustration of climbing...



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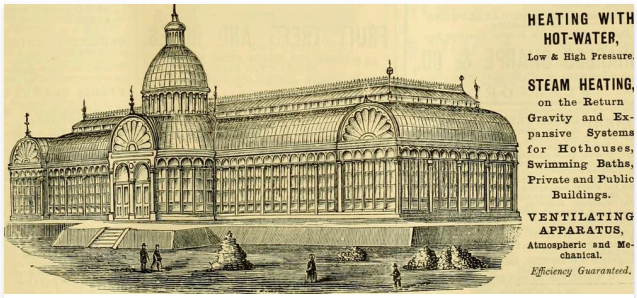


A advertisement in the *Gardener's Chronicle*...

Hothouses and stoves allowed forthe artificial cultivation of passionflower hybrids: the first hybrid species, *Passiflora* x *violacea*, was produced in the United Kingdom in the 1820s by hand pollinating plants already in cultivation. As a nineteenth-century gardening publication described it, "most of the species [of passionflower] ripen fruit in our stoves, and consequently many fine varieties have been raised by impregnating the stigmas of one with the pollen of another...with a feather."[50] The proliferation of these hybrid species, or "monsters under glass," reflect a horticultural mania intent on mixing the traits of different flowers to create copious varieties of color, size, and growth form.[51] The hybrid Passiflora x belotii has been described as smelling like "refreshers" sweets.[52] The "scarlet passionflower," described in one catalogue as "a blaze of fiery scarlet blossoms, which are set off in a never-to-be-forgotten way by the background of bright glossy green foliage," is as sickeningly elaborate as the advertiser's prose used to describe it.[53] On top of the five hundred or so "wild" species currently recognized, there are also over four hundred additional hybrid species.

Photo of *Passiflora* Sunburst. Image sourc...

Photo of *Passiflora* Kew...

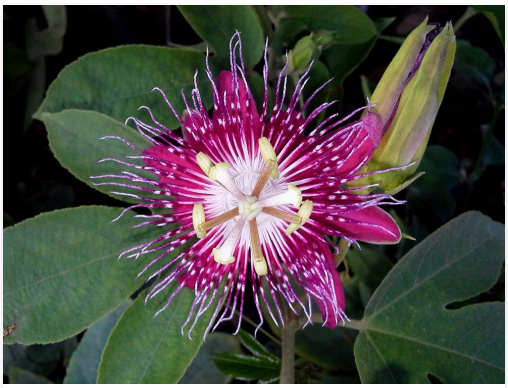


Photo of *Passiflora* Lady Margaret...

In the multiplication of passionflower species under the heat of the hothouse, the distinctions between wild and hybrid species were not always clear, as an entry on *Passiflora amabilis* in the *Annals of Horticulture* (1849) illustrates: "whether it be a wild species introduced artificially within the culturist's domain, or has sprung up under cultivation—a garden hybrid, is, as far as we can learn, a matter of uncertainty."[54] At the end of the eighteenth century, Mary Lawrance produced *A Collection of Passionflowers* (1799) consisting of 18 plates in which she aimed to "contain every species of Passion-flowers, now in cultivation in English Gardens."[55] But by the mid-nineteenth century, the *Annals of Horticulture* reported that "it would be altogether outstepping our limits, to attempt to describe, or even to enumerate, all the kinds [of passionflowers] which exist in our gardens."[56]

Passiflora alata from Mary...

The hothouse is a steamy, pungent, intoxicating, but also sickly place: as the Italian poet Gariele D'Annunzio describes in erotic and corrupting terms, "...the over-bold/ Young vines in dense luxuriance rankly grow,/ And strange weird plants their horrid buds unfold..."[57] The humidity, and the enumeration of such "strange weird plants" together under glass, creates a breeding ground for diseases such as rot. The term "hothouse flower," commonly used to refer to plants kept under glass that would only flower for a few days, developed a figurative meaning in the nineteenth century, to denote something or someone that is artificial, delicate, or fragile.[58] Women, for instance, were described as hothouse flowers, as sorts of delicate beauties. At the same time, a "hothouse" came to be used as a colloquial term for a brothel—the domain, supposedly, of diseased, corrupted, and impregnated flowers (women).[59]


Herbarium...

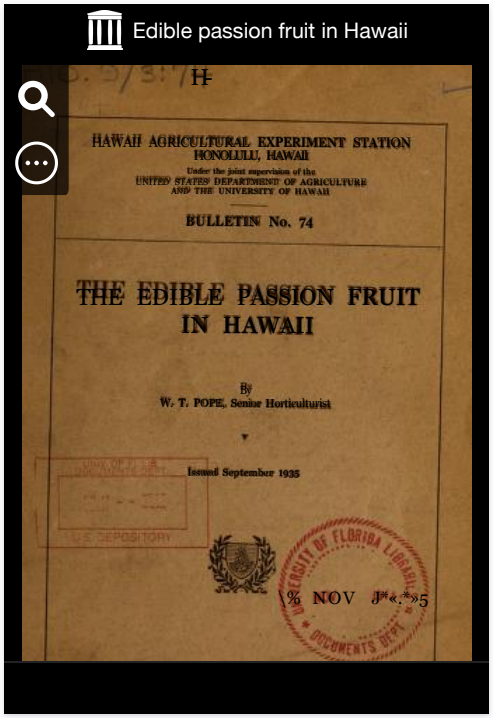

Herbarium...


Herbarium...

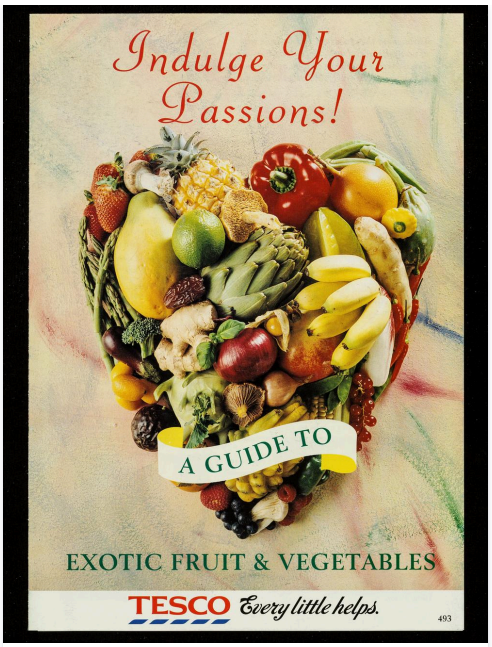

Passiflora...

The Culinary Significance of Passionfruit

As noted by Pedro Cieza de Leon and Captain John Smith in the seventeenth century, passionflower vines bear a tart fruit with a bright, citrus-adjacent flavor. In addition to their continued cultivation as ornamental plants in gardens all over the world, passionfruit has become an increasingly available and popular flavor in the American culinary world.[60] Its gastronomical success depends upon its association with tropicality, even when that tropicality is a marketed fiction. Passionfruit was introduced to Hawai'i in the 1930s, and in the postwar period, market development for passionfruit and value-added products proliferated.



Passionfruit's symbolic value in American food culture is almost an inverse of its Christian symbolism. Instead of being "discovered" in a tropical region and appropriated for Christian colonial purposes, the passionfruit was actively introduced into the exoticized landscape of Hawai'i by the colonizing force of the United States in the early twentieth century and the engine of the United States Department of Agriculture's Hawai'i Agricultural Experiment Station.[61] This was part of a broader trend of agricultural research based in Honolulu through which the United States sought to plunder the fertile tropical islands at the far reaches of its early twentieth century empire. The passionfruit seemingly delivered some sense of adventure and novelty as an ingredient for Anglo-American consumers.



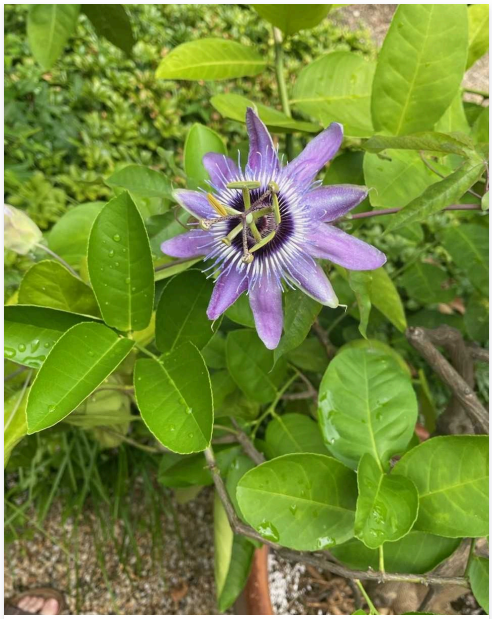
1995 Tesco ad pamphlet for 'exotic...

The semantic shift in the use of the word passion as increasingly related to emotionality in the Victorian era was capitalized upon as a marketing device, specifically used to suggest sensuality, in the twentieth century. Passionfruit product ads often emphasized themes of indulgence, temptation, and the exotic.[62] This use continues today, with passionfruit only gaining in popularity in the past ten to fifteen years. Unlike other "tropical" fruits such as mango or banana, the passionfruit's exotic associations have carried over into contemporary food culture, aided by the linguistic evolution of the word "passion," from being deeply tied to Christ to being closely connected to intense emotion, sensuality, and the exotic.

1995 Tesco ad pamphlet for 'exotic...

Conclusion

The passionflower's Spanish colonial origins in the European imagination has unfurled in the centuries since, its religious symbolism now greatly diluted while its associations with the exotic remaining essential to its cultural niche in the Anglo-American world. The early glossing of the flower's morphology with the symbols of Christ's passion served to condone the violent imperial acts of conquest in South America. In Protestant England, the symbolism of the passionflower promoted by continental Jesuits was less popular, but the passionflower was symbolically repurposed within the Victorian language of flowers. With its inclusion in a feminized, romantic, upper-class cultural phenomenon and its proliferation within British decorative arts, the passionflower was distanced from the passion of Christ and embedded deeper into associations with sensuality and the exotic. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the passionflower has been known in primarily culinary or ornamental gardening spheres. The culinary history of the passionfruit, however, in the Anglo-American colonial world has depended on the persistent association of the fruit with the exotic, even when that exoticism is pure fabrication, as with the introduction of passionfruit in Hawai'i. As "passion" took on new meanings over the course of the European imperial age, the passionflower has persistently inspired reverence and wonder, whether through association with Christ, romantic sensuality, or as an exoticized culinary product.



A passionflower growing at...

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