PRESIDENT'S COMMENTS

Francis Masson—Gardener, Explorer, Botanical Collector, Artist, and Author

"Francis Masson may not have been the boldest, most romantic or even the most important of the 18th century botanical explorers in South Africa yet the influence his work has had on the lives of ordinary people has been vastly greater than that of all his distinguished fellow travelers at the Cape."

--Frank R. Bradlow, Francis Masson's Account of Three Journeys at the Cape of Good Hope, 1994

Francis Masson was born in Aberdeen, Scotland, in August 1741. In an account of his life and work in Rees's Cyclopedia (1819), Sir James Smith wrote, "Masson was of mild temper, persevering in his pursuits, even to a great enthusiasm; of great industry, which his specimens and drawings of fish, animals, insects, plants and views of the countries he passed through reveal."

He joined the gardening staff of the royal gardens at Kew when, through the influence of Sir Joseph Banks, he received permission from King George III to become a plant collector at the Cape. Banks, who was largely responsible for the plan of collecting for Kew, had spent some time at the Cape, and was impressed immensely with the flora. He resolved to augment the Kew collections with living plants plus his own collections of herbarium and natural history specimens. By means of Masson's endeavors, Kew became one of the great—if not greatest—gardens in the world. Masson visited the Cape twice, from October 1772 to March 1775 and from January 1786 to March 1795. He was 31 when he made his first journey.

He arrived at the Cape on 30 October 1772. During his first visit, Masson made three major collecting expeditions. The first was a relatively short one from December 1772 to January 1773. His second and third expeditions were made jointly with Carl Peter Thunberg, the "Father of South African Botany." During the second expedition, he made excursions to Namaqualand, where he observed the peasantry extracting aloe sap. Masson made the first description in English of any extensive expedition into the interior of South Africa, and he was probably the first person from the British Isles to travel any considerable distance from the original settlement. Masson collected over 400 species of living plants, including Erica and Protea, which now made Kew foremost among botanical gardens. Many plants like the pelargoniums, freesias, and gladioli became widely cultivated and hybridized. After his return to Cape Town, Masson spent several months preparing and sending quantities of plants and seeds to Kew. And collectors of succulent plants can be very grateful for his contributions.

On the third journey, Masson set off across the Cape Flats on 26 September 1774 with a wagon and two Hottentots and met Thunberg. On this journey, they discovered Aloe dichotoma. They finally got back to Cape Town on 29 December. Masson sailed for England in March 1775.

Then Masson was sent on further collecting expeditions—to the Azores, Madeira, Teneriffe, and West Indies, during 1776-82, and to Spain, Portugal and Tangier from 1783-85. Leaving England on 16 October 1785, Masson arrived at Cape Town on 10 January 1786 and remained there over nine years; he departed in March 1795, shortly before the first British occupation.

The few English ships arriving and sailing from the Cape were so overflowing with passengers that Masson found it was almost impossible to send bulky consignments of bulbs and living plants back to England. He
was forced to unpack several boxes of plants, one of very curious bulbs, and pot them in pots and boxes. He had many new succulent plants. Wrote Masson, "I have some very curious Stapelias, Euphorbias, etc. but how I shall get them home, God only knows." Many of the plants were also planted out in the beds, but where Masson maintained his garden of living plants is unknown.

In 1788, Masson made an expedition to the Karoo and surrounding mountains. Early in January 1789, he shipped a collection of 400 taxa and 22 herbarium specimens to Kew; another shipment of three boxes containing 422 species followed in March. He undertook another excursion later that year and collected a fine specimen of *Strelitzia alba*. In June 1794, Masson spent time drawing some of his new species of *Stapelia*, *Haemanthus*, *Amaryllis*, *Oxalis*, and others.

Upon his return to England, he devoted his time to his only botanical publication, the highly esteemed and exceedingly rare *Stapeliae Novae*, containing 41 illustrations in color with 24 pages of accompanying text. It appeared in four parts during 1796-97 and described several new species of Stapeliae discovered in the interior parts of Africa. Six of these became the celebrated "lost plants," which have not been collected again and are known only through Masson's book and herbarium material deriving from specimens he collected. In *Stapeliae Novae*, he was responsible for all illustrations except *Stapelia gordoni*, now *Hoodia gordonii*. The British Museum library has over 100 Masson paintings made in South Africa.

In 1797, Masson was sent to North America and arrived in New York after an adventurous voyage of four months, but did not return to England. He died in Montreal, Canada, on 23 December 1805.

Francis Masson is commemorated in the genus *Massonia* Thunb. ex Houtt., and in the species *Erica massonii* Lf., *Thamnea massoniana* Dum-mer and *Protea massonii* Poir.

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