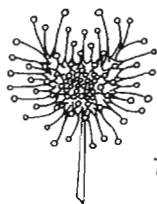


The Savage Garden

“Cape Sundews”



by
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It seems as though every genus of plants found in horticulture has one or two outstanding species that combine the attributes of both beauty and ease of growth. Thus, we have *Dieffenbachia maculata* among the dumb canes; *Howea fosteriana*, the Kentia, among the palms; *Philodendron selloum* or *oxycardium* from the philodendrons and *Aechmea fasciata* from the bromeliads. The list, of course, goes on and on. These are the plants that crowd our homes and plant shops, mass-produced to the point of tedium, taken for granted by the collector, yet the starting point for the novice.

Among the group of carnivorous plants, the venus flytrap is certainly number one, yet each genus of carnivores has its own outstanding species, the plant or plants that represent its tribe. Among the *Sarracenia*, no doubt, the winners are *S. purpurea* and *flava*, among the *Nepenthes* perhaps *N. alata* or *gracilis* or *ventricosa*..

From the genus *Drosera*, the sundews, the award-without a doubt-goes to *Drosera capensis*, the cape sundew. This magnificent sundew is often the first drosera an enthusiast starts with, along with its “companions”, the venus flytrap and purple pitcher plant. Awe-inspiring when first seen, this prince (or princess) of sundews, a dream plant when first grown, has the ironic distinction of later turning into a nightmare, a plague of weeds that will spread through a greenhouse or big garden, contaminating every other pot in its path, smothering a collection with capes, capes and more capes, breeding on and on, more and more, here, there, everywhere!

My hysteria is justified by anyone who has grown this plant!

I have vivid memories of my experience with cape sundews. One is the first time I laid eyes on a *D. capensis*.. I was a teenager, the place was the Conservatory of Flowers in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. I stood awe-struck at a little bog garden they had on display, some *Sarracenia*, some *Dionaea* and cape sundews. Previously my only experience with drosera had been the usually diminutive native plants of North America, yet here were GIANT sundews twelve inches across and just as tall, with wide, dewy, strap-shaped leaves that twisted around their prey! Wow! My second memory is of a few years later, in the greenhouse of a well-known collector. To my horror, he was plucking beautiful, glittering, baby cape sundews out of pots of his prized nepenthes, tossing them with disdain to the floor, grinding them to a smeary pulp with the heel of his shoe in the gravel. “Damn weeds,” he sneered.

Cape sundews come from the Cape Province of South Africa. This small area of the world is famous for countless varieties of horticultural plants grown throughout the world, including some famous CP. The climate can best be described as a warm-temperate or mediterranean. This means cool, wet winters and warm, dry summers, light frost if any, and a coastline that is often shrouded with chilly fog. Many other

sundews come from the same general area, such as *D. aliciae* and *regia* and *slackii*, which are some of the most popular of sundews to grow.

Although *D. capensis* is one species, many forms of the plant exist. These forms or varieties go under many common names or 'nicknames' bestowed upon them by growers for convenience. We will have to wait for a good monograph on *Drosera* to be published to sort out all of these forms, and perhaps legitimize them as true varieties or even subspecies.

Here I will discuss four plants strictly from a horticultural perspective.

The most common variety grown is probably the "regular" cape sundew, known as "wide-leaved" or "stem-forming". This plant has a scrambling stem that trails along the ground or climbs among other plants, usually cloaked with dead leaves of previous seasons. The petiole or leaf stem is rather wide, the blade even wider, covered with many red tentacles. The entire crown of leaves is usually about eight inches across, but may be broader than twelve inches in ideal situations, a large sundew indeed. The inflorescence appear on a stalk from one to two feet long, the flowers are bright pink and around 3/4 inches wide. Dozens of flowers may appear, usually one opening every day or so. The flowers open in strong sun and usually produce hundreds of seed that readily germinate within weeks or months on wet peaty soils.

If a single regular cape sundew is left alone, it rarely produces off-shoots and the stem can reach twelve inches or more in length in a few years, looking somewhat like a palm tree. However, if the crown is cut off or killed back by frost, shoots will appear along the base and the plant will clump, sending several stems in a loose rosetted pattern. Repeated trimming or frosting can result in a rather large, bushy, branching clone, startling in its size and beauty. I have one such plant I have been growing in the same 10-inch pot for over a decade now, and it must have over 50 heads on it.

The other three forms of *D. capensis* I wish to discuss are co-called narrow-leaved forms. These plants usually form short stems no more than an inch or two high after many years, but may get taller. The petiole and leaf-blade are narrow, and overall form a neater, more symmetrical plant. They don't usually clump, but severed roots will send up additional plants and damaged crowns will produce off-shoots.

The common narrow-leaved cape sundew has green leaves with red tentacles and pink flowers, like the stem-forming variety. The red cape sundew looks in shape and size like the common narrow-leaved, but the whole plant turns a stunning dark red in strong light and the flowers are a darker pink. The white cape sundew, usually called 'alba', is somewhat different in that the leaves are narrow but it will gradually form a stem rivalling the wide-leaved variety. The flowers are white, the leaves green, tentacles almost transparent, while the glands are pale pink.

Cape sundews are very easy to grow. Their basic cultivation requirements are as follows: Grow them in a soil recipe of roughly 1/2 sphagnum peat moss to 1/2 horticultural sand and/or perlite. Capes are very tolerant of other low-nutrient, acidic soils. Long-fibered sphagnum moss or milled sphagnum are excellent. They will also grow in pure peat. Grow cape sundews as container plants. The soil must be kept damp to waterlogged, and as with most CP, the "wetter the better". Sit the pot in a saucer of water. The water can fluctuate from the top of the pot to the bottom, but try to maintain a level averaging 1-2 inches. If grown in an undrained container, keep the soil wet.

Cape sundews require at least a few hours of direct sun for best growth. They do well in full sun if kept very wet. They look poor in shade. Place them on sunny windowsills, partly sunny decks or patios, or in greenhouses. If you have them under

flourescent grow-lights, use at least two bulbs and place them 6-12 inches under the bulbs on a 12 to 14 hour photo-period.

Water with only purified water. That means distilled water, or water that has been deionized or gone through a reverse-osmosis system. Rain water is excellent.

Never fertilize through the roots. Miracid or an epiphitic, or orchid 30-10-10 fertilizer may be diluted to about 1/4th strength and lightly misted on the leaves about once every month or two.

Cape sundews grow best in a temperature range of about 50F to 80F. They are extremely tolerant of a range of 32F to 100F. They will die back unprotected in frost below about 27F, but the roots can survive brief freezing to at least 15F. They greatly appreciate cool summer nights, and may not appear happy in permanently "tropical" conditions.

Typically, in ideal situations, cape sundews look best in late winter and spring. They use a lot of energy flowering in spring and summer, and crowns may shrink considerably by fall. In the wilds of South Africa, they grow in permanently wet areas that become drier before the winter rains begin.

Insect food greatly benefits these plants, but foliar fertilizer or dried insects from pet shops can be applied to the leaves. Cape sundews will even eat bits of chocolate or cheese, but they may suffer indigestion and leaves may rot.

Aphids are the primary pest, especially when grown outdoors. Apply Orthene, Diazanon, or Malathion, and try to direct the spray onto the newly developing leaves only, avoiding spraying the whole plant and soil. Twisted, deformed leaves are almost always a sign of aphid damage. In the home or terrarium, flea collars placed beside the plant can eliminate the pests but avoid contact with soil.

Here are ways to propagate cape sundews:

Leave them alone. Scattered seed will appear in any nearby pot of wet, peat-based soil.

Cut the thick black roots into 1-3 inch pieces and lay horizontally under 1/2 inch of required soil. Keep wet, in bright light and covered with seed tray domes or clear plastic bags. Plantlets will appear in weeks at moderate temperatures.

Cut off a leaf where the petiole meets the stem and lay the leaf tenticle-side up on wet peat or sphagnum. Keep the leaf under high humidity and in bright light as with root cuttings. Plantlets will appear along leaf blades in weeks. Secure leaves with pinches of moss, but do not bury.

Float leaves in cups of purified water in a bright, humid environment. Plantlets will appear in weeks, and can be divided and potted when roots appear.

If you cut the crown of a regular cape sundew to produce off-shoots along the stem. place the severed crown in a cup of pure water and it will usually send out roots. If you don't want the plants to contaminate your collections, remove the flower stalks when they are a few inches long.

Here are some things you can do with cape sundews:

For a decorative look, use plastic or glazed pottery of colors that will compliment the type of capes you wish to grow. Green-leaved, red-tenticled plants look great in green and/or red pots. Glazed black pottery is an excellent choice for all-red capes, especially with a ground-cover of live, bright green sphagnum. For a beautiful display, grow a pot full of mixed *capensis* 'red' and *capensis* 'white'. Your neighbors will faint.

Another effective combination is growing capes with other CP of a similar color scheme. For example, red capes are complimented with a ground cover of other red sundews of the rosetted variety, such as *D. slackii*. A beautiful combination are white pots or "crystal" glass pots planted with *D. capensis* 'alba', *D. filiformis* var *tracyi*, pale forms of *D. burmanni*, *Byblis liniflora*, all-green *Dionaea m.* 'heterodoxa', or other non-red plants. On the other hand, all-red plants may be grown together, or combined with other 'alba' forms. Such example as a black glazed pot planted with all-red venus flytraps, red capes, and *D. slackii*. How about red capes grown with a ground cover of *Utricularia sandersonii*.

Cape sundews themselves make a beautiful ground cover in large pots of tall *Sarracenia* grown on your deck or in the greenhouse. White cape sundews planted around a *S. flava* 'burgundy' will bring out the red of the pitcher plant. The greens and reds of *D. capensis* 'narrow' compliment the same colors of most *Sarracenia* varieties. *S. leucophylla* of the red-and-white form look superb when surrounded by all-white and all-red capes.

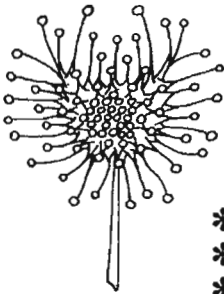
If you want a 'palm tree' look, grow a stem-forming cape in a terrarium under grow-lights for a couple of years and trim off the "thatch" of old dead leaves. Remove flowers when they appear to prevent seedling growth. Stake the plant if it becomes top-heavy with wooden skewers.

If you want the bushy-look, grow the stem variety and decapitate it in late winter. The following year prune a few of its resulting off-shoots and repeat occasionally to produce many crowns.

The stem-forming variety also makes a great hanging-pot display, as the stems will hang and droop over the pot's edges, looking bushy and fern-like.

To this day, I cannot kill a cape sundew. Sure, they come up like weeds in many of my other pots, but when I pluck 'em out they usually return from broken roots. I'll drop the plucked plants into bowls of water where they will grow 'aquatically' for weeks until I get the time to pot them up. Give them away to friends or schools! Cape sundews are a rewarding beginners plant. But they can still make long-time growers like me pause and admire them for their vigor and beauty.

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