

Aloe vera on Lanzarote

By Colin C. Walker

Aloe vera is undoubtedly the best known succulent of all. Its fame arises from the supposed medicinal qualities of extracts from its leaves. Its use goes back at least 2,000 years and it is recorded in manuscript herbals dating back to at least 516 AD (Carter et al., 2011). Today *A. vera* is the basis of a multi-billion dollar cosmetics and toiletries industry worldwide, based on plantations or farms. It is interesting to note that the genus *Aloe* consists of over 500 species and yet the only other species currently exploited commercially is *Aloe ferox* in South Africa, where natural populations are harvested rather than farmed. Other species may have commercial potential yet to be exploited.

Aloe vera is grown commercially in many parts of the world with tropical and temperate climates that are ideal for outdoor cultivation. My wife Marjorie and I have recently been on a short holiday to Lanzarote, where we observed the cultivation and commercial use of *Aloe vera*. On this Canary Island, the climate is ideal for growing this plant and it's probably the commonest succulent we saw on the visit where we observed it growing in gardens and in roadside plantings (Fig 1).



Fig 1

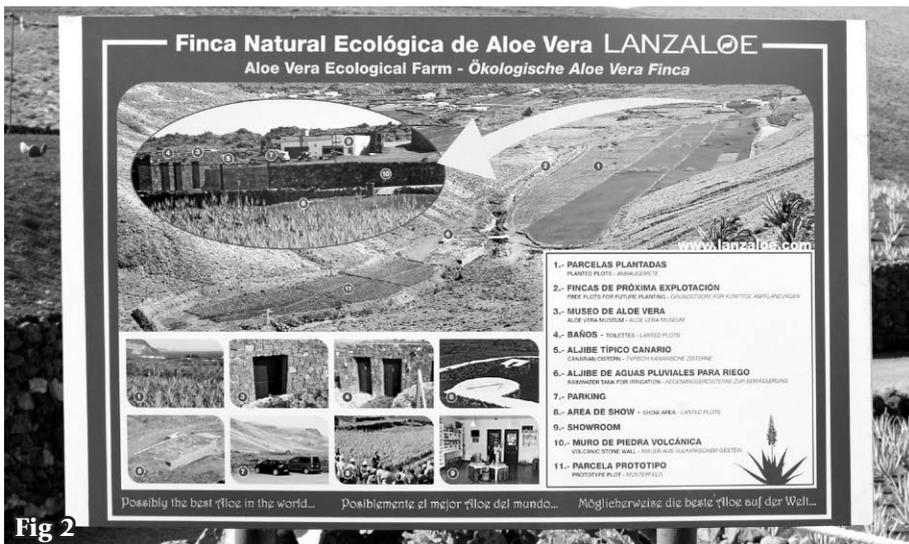


Fig 2

In the north of Lanzarote we visited an *Aloe vera* farm run by a company called *Lanzaloe* (Fig 2). Many acres were devoted to this monoculture (Figs 3 & 4): the plants were growing in the volcanic ash typical of the

island, with an irrigation system used to water and feed the plants, which were very healthy and many were in flower (Fig 5). The site had a small shop but no other commercial operation, so presumably the aloe



Fig 3



Fig 4



Fig 5

leaves are harvested and transported elsewhere for extraction of the juice.

Wherever we went on the island, each large village or town had an *Aloe vera* shop (Fig 6), and in the larger shopping areas there were several shops, so clearly sale of *Aloe vera* products is big business, especially because of the large number of tourists attracted to Lanzarote, an easily accessible and popular holiday destination. The larger shops also featured museums with displays outlining the history and commercial use of *Aloe vera*. Here I learned, for example, that Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) was an advocate in the use of *Aloe* as a medicinal plant. He said that “You ask me what were the secret forces which sustained me during my long fasts. Well, it was unshakeable faith in God, my simple and frugal life style and the *Aloe* whose benefits I discovered upon my arrival in South Africa at the end of the nineteenth century”.



Fig 6

The *Aloe vera* shops on the island of Lanzarote are run principally by the company *aloe Lanzarote* and stock a wide range of toiletries and cosmetics, far more than I have found available here in the UK. A small range of these products is shown in Fig 7. As a result of our visit I'm now a regular user of *Aloe vera* after-shave lotion. I don't know how popular such products are in New Zealand, but certainly their availability here in the UK has increased significantly in recent years.

For readers wanting to learn more about *Aloe vera* and use of the products made from it, there is a wide range of popular books available on the subject from which I recommend Barcroft & Myskja (2003) as a readable and authoritative guide.



Fig 7

References

- Barcroft, A. & Myskja, A. (2003)** *Aloe vera. Nature's silent healer*. BAAM Publishing Ltd., London.
- Carter, S., Lavranos, J.J., Newton, L.E. & **Walker, C.C. (2011)** *Aloes. The definitive guide*. Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew & the British Cactus & Succulent Society.