

Stapelia hirsuta

by Colin C. Walker

Potted History

Stapelia hirsuta is now a fairly common plant, having been in cultivation in Europe for over 300 years. It appears to have flowered first in Amsterdam where Caspar Commelin (1706) published an engraving of it in flower (Fig. 1). Commelin called this plant '*Asclepias Africana, aizoides, flore pulchre fimbriato*' which translates as 'The

African Swallow-wort, with fair [or more accurately 'beautifully'] hairy flowers'. He provided a brief description to accompany the engraving and gave its habitat as the Cape based on information from an unpublished codex (manuscript) by Nicholas Witsen, Burgomaster of Amsterdam and a central figure in Dutch scientific circles.



Fig. 1

Asclepias Africana aizoides flore pulchre fimbriato (= *Stapelia hirsuta*). t.19 from Commelin (1706)

Stapelia hirsuta continued

One of the best of the subsequent 18th century coloured images was published by Philip Miller, who was a renowned British gardener and superintendent of the Society of Apothecaries at the Chelsea Physic Garden.

Miller not only built up an extensive plant collection but he was also a major author on the plants under his care. His famous *Gardeners Dictionary* went through eight editions (1731–1768) but includes very few illustrations. However, 397 different plants were illustrated in 300 colour plates in a separate work entitled *Figures of the most beautiful, useful, and uncommon plants described in the Gardeners Dictionary* (Miller, 1755–1760).

One of these plates illustrates a stapeliad (Fig. 2). The name he used for this plant is *Stapelia denticulis ramorum erectis* meaning 'Stapelia with erect indentures [tubercles] on the branches'. The artist for this painting and also the engraver of the published plate is John Miller. To accompany the attractive painting, Miller provided a detailed description of this plant, its flowers, the fly eggs and maggots:

'The plant grows naturally upon the Rocks at the Cape of Good Hope, from whence it was first brought to the Gardens in Holland; but is now become common in most Parts of Europe. The Root is composed of many strong Fibres, from which arise several succulent four-cornered Stalks, which send out other Branches of the same Shape from their Side, which have Indentures on each Angle their whole Length; whose Points are erect. The Stalks or Branches are of a deep green Colour; but the Angles and Points of the Indentures are inclining to brown, especially if the Plants are exposed in the open Air in Summer. The Flowers come out from the Side of the Stalks, standing upon long fleshy Footstalks. They have small permanent Empalements, which are cut into Five Segments; and One large plain Petal of a thick leathery Substance, which is deeply cut into Five acute Points. The Inside of the Petal is variegated and hairy, and the Borders of the Segments are closely furnished with long brown Hairs. In the Centre is placed the double starry Nectarium, whose Points seems as if they were torn, which covers the

Stamina and Germen, and is of a purple Colour. The Outside of the Petal is of a herbaceous pale Colour, and smooth. This Plant flowers during great Part of the Summer. The Flower, when fully expanded has a very foetid Odour; so like that of Carrion as to deceive the common Flesh Flies, who deposit their eggs all round the Nectarium in great plenty. These do frequently come to have life, and move, but very soon die for want of Provision'.



Fig. 2

This species was formally named as *Stapelia hirsuta* by Linnaeus in 1753 whose only reference to an illustration was to the Commelin plate (Fig. 1). Later in 1768 Miller adopted the Linnaean name and ever since then this is what this species has been known as. More recently it has been recognised as the type species of its genus which currently consists of 28 species

Stapelia denticulis ramorum erectis
(= *Stapelia hirsuta*)
t.258 from Miller
(1755–1760)

Stapelia hirsuta continued

(Bruyns, 2005). It typifies stapelias in having four-angled pubescent stems and hairy flowers. The present concept of this species is a very broad one with five varieties being recognised.

Flowering in my collection

The clone currently flowering in my collection in October 2022 (Fig. 3) matches well to Miller's description. It is a tight clump with stems up to 18 cm tall, branching freely from the base and velvety to the touch. The flower when expanded so that the lobes are not recurved is about 11cm across. It is dark red-purple in the centre with yellow irregular stripes on the lobes. It lives up to its name since it is very hairy with hairs up to 6mm long on the margins although the centres of the lobes are relatively hairless. Despite Miller's description of the flower having a strong odour, my plant has only a very faint unpleasant smell. Fortunately with the plant growing in the conservatory I have yet to observe fly activity around the flowers and no eggs have been deposited! This plant matches the description of *S. hirsuta* var. *hirsuta*.

Stapelia hirsuta in habitat

The broad concept of this species adopted by Bruyns (2005) describes it as being widespread and very variable with a wide U-shaped distribution pattern ranging from southern Namibia through the Cape into KwaZulu-Natal. Variety *hirsuta* occurs from Namaqualand south and into the west of the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. Bruyns observes that, 'Over its whole range, plants of var. *hirsuta* are found among bushes on gentle slopes or flats or on exposed, rocky outcrops in mountains'. ■

Photos: Colin C. Walker

References

- Bruyns, P.V. (2005) *Stapeliads of Southern Africa and Madagascar*. Two volumes. Umdaus Press, Hatfield, South Africa.
- Commelin, C. (1706) *Horti medici Amstelaedamensis plantae rariores et exoticae ad vivum aeri incisae*. F. Haringh, Leiden, t.19.
- Miller, P. (1755–1760) *Figures of the most beautiful, useful, and uncommon plants described in the gardeners dictionary*. 1st ed. 300 hand coloured plates. John Rivington, London. *Stapelia hirsuta*, t.253.



Figs. 3 and 4

Stapelia hirsuta in flower and a close-up of the flower

