



Colonialism on the Window Sill

28 May 2025 – 25 May 2026

How did the star pine get into the living room? What does the African violet have to do with colonial voyages of conquest? And why are pelargoniums from South Africa a case of 'biopiracy'?

The new exhibition *Colonialism on the Window Sill* shines a spotlight on ten plants that have been favourites of European living rooms and balconies for centuries, though their natural habitats are outside the continent. Star pine, ficus tree, aloe vera, begonia, geranium/pelargonium, bow string hemp, spider plant, dieffenbachia, cactus, and the African violet: they exemplify the complex interweaving of botany and ethnographic collection history and show the transition from an 'exotic' object to an everyday houseplant.

The exhibition in the participatory space *zam* at the Weltmuseum Wien invites visitors to discover the stories behind well-known non-European crop and medicinal plants. On display are living plants combined with historical objects and photographs from the collections of the Weltmuseum Wien as well as herbarium specimens and images from the Natural History Museum Vienna, the MAK – Museum of Applied Arts, and the Wien Museum.

Colonialism on the Window Sill makes one thing very clear: plants have biographies too. The exhibition explores the cultural appropriation of non-European plants and their exploitation and repurposing in European contexts.

Plants tell more than meets the eye

Cactus, dieffenbachia, aloe vera, and countless other plants did not come to Europe and its museums by chance – they often travelled together with ethnographic objects on long sea voyages by European expeditions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The plants were



initially treasures and status symbols that only the nobility and upper classes could afford. The spider plant, native to Africa and admired by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, began its houseplant career in the refined setting of royal courts—before it became a popular hanging plant in middle-class homes.

Plants on the road

From the seventeenth century onwards, plant hunters, botanists, and commercially run nurseries around the world systematically searched for medicinal and crop plants that were suitable for large-scale cultivation for export. Plant traders made these plants, now known as cash crops, more widely available. While seeds, bulbs, or rhizomes were easy to ship, transporting whole plants was a major problem: they dried out, rotted, froze, or were destroyed by seawater. The invention of Ward's box by the British doctor Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward (1791–1868) provided a remedy: a mobile miniature glass house that created a self-sufficient ecosystem. It became standard equipment for expeditions, but had one major disadvantage: the soil it carried also introduced pathogens into foreign ecosystems.

Plants as colonial objects

The exhibition combines living plants with historical objects from ethnographic and natural history collections that document their journey into Western households, gardens, trade, and pharmaceutical companies.

James Cook discovered the star pine on Norfolk Island in the South Pacific on his second circumnavigation of the world in 1774. He recognized this straight-growing coniferous tree as a suitable building material for ship masts and took it with him – as well as weapons, including a knotted sling on display in the exhibition.

The aloe vera showcase focuses on the modern significance of the plant for the cosmetics industry. Once known in Egypt as the 'plant of immortality' and used to embalm the dead, aloe vera is now a global cash crop. In addition to photographs from the areas of origin, the exhibition also features an aloe vera product from a Korean cosmetics company, which was honoured for the packaging design of its Soothing Gel.

The African violet, which adorns many windowsills, originally comes from East Africa and arrived in Europe as part of the Gasi expedition organized by the German East African Society (DOAG). The colonial official Walter von Sait Paul-Illaire (1860–1940) 'discovered' the plant in the Usambara region in the Eastern Arc Mountains (Tanzania and Kenya) and sent its seeds to the German botanist Hermann Wendland (1825–1903). After Wendland's first description of the plant, the horticultural company Ernst Benary in Erfurt secured the property rights. In the exhibition, the plant can be seen together with a drum from Tanzania. This object arrived on the k.k. Saida of the Austrian navy. The ship's doctor Stefan Paulay (1839–1913) presumably received the instrument



in return for his treatment of the Gasi expedition leader Albrecht von Bülow (1864–1892) – the latter having stolen it from the local population in February 1887 during their fight against the German colonizers in Usungula (Tanzania).

The cactus, as a symbol of survival in extreme conditions, and the geranium, whose versatile use as a remedy dates back centuries, illustrate the spread of plants through the colonial network of trade and voyages of exploration, but also how countries in the so-called Global South still hardly benefit from the economic utilization of their biological treasures.

The pelargonium, which is so popular here as an ornamental plant, has been used for centuries in its native South Africa as a medicine for respiratory diseases. A German company secured patents on the traditional remedy without giving the local population in South Africa a share of its profits. In the exhibition, root parts of *Pelargonium sidoides* from the collection of the Weltmuseum Wien are juxtaposed with a herbal medicine containing the active ingredient of *Pelargonii radix*. International agreements such as the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) are intended to ensure that the countries of origin share in Western profits and that biopiracy is also addressed in the context of climate change.

The most famous flower boxes in the world

It will come as a surprise that the popular geranium not only adorns rustic country houses, but can even be prescribed by a conservation order. Architect Adolf Loos (1870–1933) caused a huge scandal in the early 1910s with his house on Michaelerplatz, which was planned without any façade decoration. Emperor Franz Josef I called it 'the house without eyebrows', and it was only when Loos agreed to have copper flower boxes installed that the building could be completed in 1912. Today, a preservation order stipulates the planting of red geraniums in these boxes.

Colonialism on the Window Sill offers a playful and surprising look at plants in our everyday lives today and their global journey through history.

The exhibition was curated by Bettina Zorn and Florian Rainer.
Exhibition designer was Gerhard Veigel.

Exhibition website:

<https://www.weltmuseumwien.at/en/exhibitions/colonialism-on-the-window-sill/>



Events

The supporting cultural education programme for children, adults, and schools will be regularly supplemented and expanded during the course of the exhibition. Detailed information on all programme items and general information on the special exhibition can be found here:

<https://www.weltmuseumwien.at/en/exhibitions/colonialism-on-the-window-sill/>

Children's and family programme

Sat, 14 June, 4:30 p.m.

Open studio for young and old: 'Leaf art – nature leaves an impression'

On this Saturday, our studio is open to young and old – during this time you can come whenever you want. Visit us together with your adult companion and experience art together. This time the focus is on leaf art. In the studio you can paint, cut, glue, or model whatever you like – together with your companion, because teamwork produces the best results!

For children aged 3 to 10 and accompanying adults

Programme for adults

Guided tour through the special exhibition

Sat, 7 June, 11 a.m.

Guided tour with the curator

Tue, 17 June, 5 p.m.

With **Bettina Zorn**

Botanical guided tour on Heldenplatz/in the Burggarten

Sat, 14 June, 11 a.m.

With **Cristina Klein**

Subject to change!

Press photographs

Press releases and images for up-to-date coverage of special exhibitions and projects at the Weltmuseum Wien are available for download free of charge from our press area:

<https://www.weltmuseumwien.at/en/press/>

Colonialism on the Window Sill

Exhibition poster

© KHM–Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien (left) /

© Naturhistorisches Museum Wien (right)



Cactus Echinocactus texensis

Herbarium specimen

© Naturhistorisches Museum Wien



Richard Teschner (1879-1948)

Cacti, 1925

Print

© KHM–Museumsverband, Theatermuseum



Auracaria in the orangery, Vienna
© Naturhistorisches Museum Wien



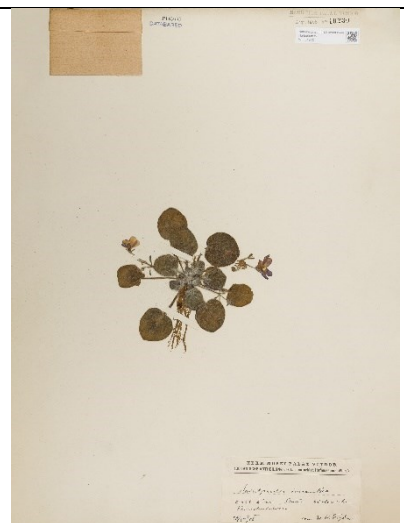
African violet (*Saintpaulia jonatha*)
From: Gartenflora, 1893
© Naturhistorisches Museum Wien



Locomotive of the Usambara railway
Photograph
© KHM-Museumsverband, Weltmuseum Wien



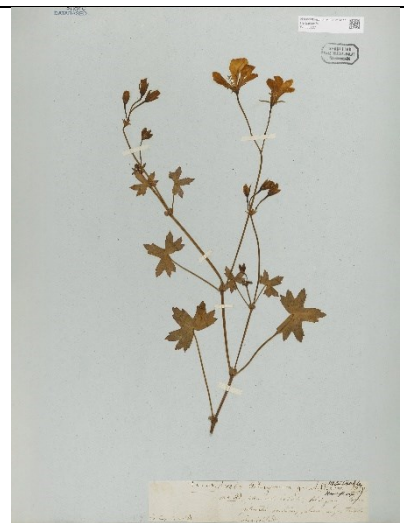
African violet (*Saintpaulia jonatha*)
Herbarium specimen
© Naturhistorisches Museum Wien



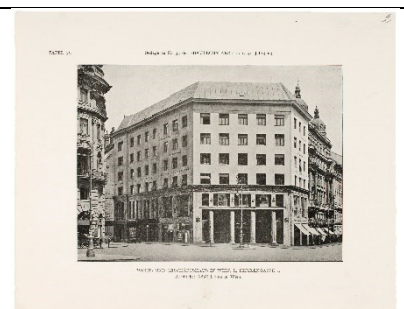
Pelargonium achievement, advertisement illustration by Horto van Houtteano
© Naturhistorisches Museum Wien



Pelargonium grandiflorum
Herbarium specimen
© Naturhistorisches Museum Wien



Looshaus on Michaelerplatz, Vienna, ca. 1911
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**Opening times, tickets, entrance fees**

www.weltmuseumwien.at/en/information

Additional information regarding your visit

Guided tours, bookings, and reservations for events

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Information, questions, and suggestions

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Exhibition programme and events

All events are listed online in the Weltmuseum Wien [event calendar](#).

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