

# the garden of neglect

Caroline Baum discovers the brief but operatic wonders of the Night-flowering Cactus – a species that rewards her indifference

**I am not a gardener but I have a garden.**

More by default than by intent, in our quarter-acre bush domain, I have become the Keeper of the Pots. While my husband does the big stuff, building dry stone walls, pruning trees and composting, I content myself with the micro version of horticulture, barely getting my hands dirty, like Marie Antoinette playing the royal rustic shepherdess, piling a little bit of soil into decorative vessels and arranging a variety of succulents in them – plants chosen expressly because they thrive on neglect. I prefer their enduring, eccentric, sculptural shapes and juicy foliage to fleeting floral prettiness.

Or at least I thought I did, until someone gave me a cutting of a large, flat leaf shaped like the end of an oar and told me to just stick it in a pot and ignore it. Four years later, having happily followed those instructions to the letter, I was unexpectedly repaid for my indifference with a perverse demonstration of gratitude: the strappy paddle transformed itself, like ugly duckling into swan, blooming with such extravagant beauty that I fell deeply and completely in love.

The night flowering cactus (Epiphyllum oxypetalum or Hylocereus undatus – I'm not quite sure which is the more correct: like a shy movie star adopting a pseudonym to check into a hotel, it avoids identification) is the most mysterious plant you can imagine.

Its behaviour is so peculiar it seems more like an animal. The flowers form directly off the leaf, shooting out a stem like an engorged artery, which fattens before your very eyes, pumping god-knows-what nutrients and energy into a missile shaped bloom that grows within the most sinister-looking venous pink cocoon. Then, when it reaches its optimal size, it rears its head like a snake about to bite until finally, without warning to the uninitiated and only when the sky is at its darkest, it opens in an explosively gorgeous display, like a firework. By morning it is tumescent, wilted and limp like a ballerina's tulle skirt caught in the rain.

The whole thing has an operatic degree of tragedy about it, like a final aria before dying.

Others evidently agree, as I discovered when I read that the plant is often called The Queen of the Night cactus, named after the sorceress in Mozart's The Magic Flute.

As if the visuals were not erotic enough, the scent is overpoweringly seductive: imagine Coco Chanel distilling the essence of all the world's gardenias, and then adding a secret ingredient.

I first witnessed the full impact of cactus power last year on Australia Day. Friends were leaving unsuspectingly after dinner. When I opened our front door I was hit by a powerful fragrance but unaware of its source until someone shouted, "Oh my god", and pointed in the darkness to a pure white star – not in the sky, but at ground level. Like a water lily without the water.

After that, it was as if we were on safari, calling

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to each other for clearer vantage points, pointing our cameras at it from all angles, trying to capture its complex glamour. Truly, it has the charisma of a diva. Outer petals stretched back for maximum impact and come-hither appeal, framing and displaying a sexually explicit spiral of frilled pistils and stamens loaded with rich lemon yellow pollen. Ignoring our vulgar paparazzi behaviour, the bloom swayed gently in the night breeze, dispensing fragrance like an incense burner offering us its blessing.

Smitten, the next morning I looked it up: originating in Mexico the plant is a climbing perennial. It thrives at the top of the jungle canopy feeding on bird and bat droppings. The flower's showy purpose is to attract one particular moth to pollinate it. But of course that moth does not live in Australia making its flamboyant courtship display futile. Websites appear stumped as to how the plant goes about

its reproductive business here, but it grows in NSW and Queensland, where it is classified, ignominiously, as a weed. This makes me feel indignant on its behalf: an innocent condemned, guilty through no fault of its own, its only crime that it thrives in our climate. Surely such perfection and sensory generosity is blameless?

Last year, like everything else, the blooms on the cactus came early, flowering before Christmas instead of marking the end of the summer holidays: an early, secular version of the star of Bethlehem, trumping all other Christmas baubles. The first year it bloomed it produced four flowers (two of which burst on the same night for the most spectacular double whammy – like twins winning Miss World). This year it has eight. I watch the plant closely, issuing regular bulletins

to my husband as the vigil draws to a climax.

Thanks to Facebook, I have found other night cactus owners who share my admiration. We tell each other how many buds we have, when ours are about to burst and compare notes on details such as whether there was a full moon when it opened. We have become nocturnal prowlers, out with torches in our pyjamas, posting boastful images to fellow enthusiasts. The cactus may have been slow to deliver its first show, but is now generous in its displays and so reliable that I feel like issuing tickets to a performance: Tonight, for one night only, ladies and gentlemen, the diva of the dark..."

Now I flatter myself that I must be a little green-fingered – my succulent royal is growing fast, thriving in indirect sunlight with no watering or food, thanking me abundantly for all the neglect I shower on her. Perhaps I am a gardener after all. ●

