

PELARGONIUM COTYLEDONIS

By Sue Haffner

The genus *Pelargonium* contains about 250 species, almost all confined to temperate and semitropical regions. Approximately 90% of known species are found in South Africa and a few more in East Africa. A handful of species have become isolated from the main area of distribution. *Pelargonium cotyledonis* is one of these, found only on the island of St. Helena in the South Atlantic, about 2,00 km west of the African coast.

On the island, *P. cotyledonis* is confined to south and southwest facing cliffs where it is protected from grazing goats. It is a branched shrublet with succulent stems. The leaves, clustered at the ends of the branches are distinctive: leathery, prominently-veined, heart-shaped, with densely woolly lower surfaces, and slightly rolled-under margins. The flowers are white. In habitat, it blooms from September to February, but mostly in November. The plant is leafless in the dry season. It was introduced into Europe in 1765 and described by Linnaeus in 1771, who mistakenly thought it originated in the Cape Province. Despite this long history, it is still not common in collections.

Cultivation: well-draining, slightly acid mix, adequate water in the growing season; very light water while dormant. Protect from frost and also from full summer sun. Propagation is by cuttings and seed.

St. Helena, which is part of the British Overseas Territory, has a temperate semitropical climate moderated by trade winds. It is famous in history as the site of Napoleon Bonaparte's final exile. He was sent there in 1815 after his defeat in the battle of Waterloo. He died on the island in 1821.



Pelargonium cotyledonis

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