

A FLOWER NAMED AFTER THE QUEEN OF ENGLAND

BIRD OF PARADISE FLOWER (STRELITZIA REGINAE)

The *Strelitzia Reginae* (or Bird of Paradise flower) shown and described below is not to be confused with another tropical flower, the *false* Bird of Paradise Flower (*Heliconia*) that is found widely in tropical gardens in SE Asia. In the most common varieties of the *true* flower, the flower petals are generally brilliant orange and there are some flashes of violet among them. They burst out of the side of the flower stem at a point just after the typical 30° bend in the stem and thus appear to be springing out of the top of the head of the 'bird'. These features – especially the curve in the stem – help to distinguish the true from the false flower.



Images of 3 Oct 2023, showing flower display inside the E&O Hotel, Penang, Malaysia.

This is a tropical flower with a fascinating mix of English, German and South African connections. The flower's nickname, Bird of Paradise, is said to derive from its spectacular appearance, which can be likened to the showy plumage of the various tropical forest birds known as birds of paradise. It is also in South Africa known as Crane flower, because of a perceived similarity to a crane bird's head. However, few people know the background to the flower's nomenclature, as described below.

The flower, of which there are numerous varieties and colours, is indigenous to South Africa – although it is now cultivated widely in tropical climates worldwide. It appears to have been “discovered” and first formally named in 1788 by Joseph Banks (1743-1820), the eminent English botanist and naturalist. Banks, educated in the natural sciences at Harrow, Eton and Christ Church Oxford, was independently very wealthy and this allowed him to travel widely around the world on his various missions of botanical discovery. He took part in the first epic voyage of Captain James Cook around the world in HMS Endeavour, 1768-1771.

The flower was first brought to England and cultivated in the botanic gardens at Kew, near London, in 1773. It was formally classified and named by Banks in 1788. Banks had a long association with these botanic gardens and was closely involved in securing continuing support for them from the King and Royal Family. The Kew site dates back at least to the mid 1750s and has its origins in the much older royal estates surrounding the nearby royal palaces of Kew and Richmond.

Joseph Banks, in formally classifying and naming the flower in 1788, took the politically wise step of naming it after the Queen of England at the time, Queen Charlotte, thus ensuring continuing royal support for the Kew gardens' research and other botanic activities. Charlotte, a German princess of the Duchy of Mecklenburg-Strelitz¹, had become Queen Charlotte after marrying England's King George III in 1761 when she was 17 and shortly after George had become King in 1760 at the age of 22. The flower's official name chosen by Banks was *Strelitzia Reginae*, commemorating both Strelitz, the place of the Queen's ancestry in Germany, and the Queen herself by the use of *Reginae* (= of the Queen). The Queen was an amateur botanist and had been important in the setting up of Kew Botanic Gardens.



Queen Charlotte, consort of King George III

The *Strelitzia Reginae* flower grows from a clump root (a rhizome), like the ginger plant. It can be propagated from the root or from its seeds. In respect of its seeds, it is one of the very few flowers that requires pollination by birds, rather than insects. Technically, a pollinating bird sits on one of the petals as it feeds on nectar contained in part of the flower; the bird's weight then triggers a pollen sac to open and disperse the pollen, with the bird then unknowingly carrying the pollen to the pollen-receiving part of the flower.

¹ This was a small Duchy in the north-east of today's Germany, some 50 miles north of Berlin and around half-way from Berlin to the Baltic coast of Germany. It lies about 560 miles east of London.

Following her early marriage to Britain’s King George III in 1761, Charlotte of Strelitz had 15 children, 13 of whom survived to adulthood. These and their descendants added generously to the pool of members of the intertwined German-Danish royal families who occupied most of the inherited “royal” positions across north Europe at that time. In 1883, some 120 years after Charlotte’s own marriage, and several descendants further on, two of Charlotte’s descendants married and subsequently became King George V and Queen Mary. George (son of Edward VII and grandson of Queen Victoria) was Charlotte’s great-great grandson; his bride was the German Princess Mary of Teck, who was Charlotte’s great-granddaughter. This is a good example of the intermarriage between cousins from this extended European royal family network that was prevalent at that time.



The small duchy of Mecklenburg-Strelitz can be seen at top right of the map, above the word Brandenburg.