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The super-edelweiss from Valais

Throughout Europe, the edelweiss is a symbol of the purity of nature and of first-rate Swiss quality. Yet it is highly probable that the best-known of alpine flora took root in the Alps only after the last Ice Age and originally comes from Asia, where the high steppes are home to a wide range of highly similar edelweiss species.

By Philippe Welti

Not only do hundreds of restaurants and hotels bear its name, Switzerland Tourism also uses the fuzzy white plant to advertise Switzerland around the world as an alpine holiday destination. Why? The plant is so incredibly rare and beautiful that most Swiss know it only from the legendary folklore films of the 1950s and 1960s, or perhaps from the logo of the Alpine Club or the name proudly borne by many a shooting club. The fact is that lots of organisations like these adopt the edelweiss as their symbol. This is why this popular flower was the first plant to be afforded protected status in Austria, Switzerland, Germany and Italy at the international conference of alpine clubs held in Obwalden in 1878. This was a highly necessary step since the edelweiss was already disappearing along popular hiking trails and climbing routes.

The fact that the edelweiss was formerly used by mountain folk as a cure for stomach complaints already lends it a magical quality. But in its day, the plant was also used as an aphrodisiac. Whoever had the courage and strength to seek out such a flower and present it to their beloved was rewarded with their eternal love and devotion. Such exploits were portrayed in sentimental films about Swiss village life, where strapping heroes climbed to dizzying heights, narrowly avoiding falling off cliffs, to pick some richly-prized edelweiss for their beloved. The happy ending was guaranteed. Those were magical moments, and the tears flowed freely among female audiences in the cinemas of the 1950s. "Ah, I wish I could find a hero like that to fetch me edelweiss from some inaccessible mountain meadow", sighed many a Swiss miss.

Soon, young courting men will no longer need to risk steep climbs up sheer mountainsides to obtain the Matterhorn of alpine plants. The dream of thousands of florists and flower lovers is about to come true: soon you will be able to buy the edelweiss for your sweetheart from your local florist.

Pascal Sigg of the Agroscope Changins-Wädenswil research institute in Conthey, Valais, has devised a programme aimed at adapting the cultivation method for cut flower production in order to improve the stem length of edelweiss and adjust it to other cut flowers as well as to prolong their life in the vase. The research work for species suitable for large-scale cultivation in alpine regions has already been going on for ten years. The aim is not only to grow edelweiss for cut-flow-

er purposes. Thanks to various agents such as antioxidants which occur naturally in the blossoms and have beneficial properties for our organism, the edelweiss is attracting ever greater interest in the cosmetics and food industries.

The first long-stemmed edelweiss was harvested two years ago. Now the breakthrough is just around the corner: the research conducted by Pascal Sigg shows that the new species, called "Helvetia", is the first to boast a sufficiently long stem length of 30 to 40 centimetres, good cultivation properties and suitability for cut-flower use. The new species must now be tested before it can be grown by flower producers. For this reason, edelweiss cannot be purchased from Agroscope. Sigg hopes that the long-stemmed edelweiss will be available from florists within one to two years. "Flower lovers will soon be able to offer their guests bouquets featuring indigenous alpine plants", says Sigg. The "Helvetia" edelweiss will stay fresh in the vase for at least ten days.

The 31-year-old landscape engineer has devoted all his research to the edelweiss. Why the queen of alpine flora in particular? "The plant is the best-known flower in the world. Its uses have been limited to date. I was intrigued by the challenge of growing a long-stemmed edelweiss that could be made universally available", says Geneva-born Sigg. He hopes that his work will help the protected plant to continue growing wild in the high Alps. How? "Because the temptation to pick edelweiss will be much less if people know they can buy the flower legally from a florist."

The enthusiasm of the research scientists in Conthey is shared by the tourist industry. "The flower is an important ambassador for our canton. We want to offer our guests the opportunity to take home a memento of their holiday in the form of an edelweiss", says Urs Zenhäusern, Director of Valais Tourism.

