

*Dracaena*

*Asparagaceae*  
[*Dracaenaceae*]

*Dracaena* is derived for some authorities from Greek *drakaina* (female dragon) with reference to the thickened plant juices which were believed to resemble dragon's blood. For others it commemorates an English navigator, explorer and privateer, Vice-Admiral Sir Francis Drake (c.1540-1596). In the mid-1560s he, and his cousin Sir John Hawkins (1532-1595), carried the first slaves from western Africa to the Caribbean under an English flag which, together with his plundering of Spanish treasure, made him a fortune. Drake set sail for the Pacific Coasts of North and South America in 1577 in the HMS *Pelican* with four other ships, under a commission from Elizabeth I to harass the Spanish there. He rounded Cape Horn at the tip of South America through the Magellan Straits (avoiding the rougher waters of what is now known as Drake Passage between Cape Horn and the South Shetland Islands), only to be blown off course to at least 56° south. This would earn him recognition as the first antarctic explorer, a 'record' which remained unchallenged for about 200 years. Despite further storms he sailed into the Pacific Ocean (by then no longer accompanied by other ships and with his own re-christened HMS *Golden Hind*) and found some of the Spanish in their South American ports. Following various escapades he proceeded to sail as far north as some say California others Vancouver, looking for a passage east. Unsuccessful in this he turned south-west from the North American Coast and sailed (68 days out of sight of land ) across the Pacific Ocean to the Spice Islands (the Moluccas now part of eastern Indonesia) then under Portuguese domination. From there after refitting in Java he aimed for Europe via the Cape of Good Hope and reached Plymouth in Devon in September 1580, carrying more Spanish treasure, and spices. As the first Englishman to circumnavigate the world he was fêted and lauded. Not only did Elizabeth I knighted him on board ship in 1581 but he also became Mayor of Plymouth and in 1584 the Member of Parliament for the town. From 1585 Drake continued to attack Spanish vessels in the Caribbean (when he brought a cargo of potatoes (*Solanum tuberosum*) and tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*), as well as some unhappy Virginian colonists, back to England) and Europe which only contributed to the Spanish decision to mount the Armada. Before the Armada sailed he occupied Cadiz harbour for three days and '*singed the King of Spain's beard*'. Then when it appeared in 1588 off the English coast, Drake, as Vice-Admiral under the Admiral and statesman, Charles Howard (1536-1624), led some of the English fleet in pursuit of the Spanish up the English Channel. Fire-ships were then released to break the Spanish formation and the following day at the Battle of Gravelines the Armada was defeated. Then in 1589 he sacked the Spanish port of Corunna. During his remaining years he harried the Spanish in the Caribbean and in 1596 died out there from dysentery.

This name Dragon's blood, one applied to all the trees in the genus (as well as a Socotran name, Blood of the Two Brothers), is said to be accounted for in a Socotran legend that itself may be of Indian origin. According to it Dracula-like dragons gorged themselves on elephants' blood – so much so that they twined over the elephant's trunk to bite the poor beast behind the ear to satisfy their thirst. But one day an elephant crushed the dragon beneath him as he fell to the ground dying and cinnabar was formed as the victimised

animal's blood mixed with matter from the dragon. The name cinnabar was then given to the red earth when it contained red mercuric sulphide and in due course the *Dracaena* gum.