

*Nerine sarniensis*

[Synonyms : *Amaryllis sarniensis*]

**GUERNSEY LILY** is a bulbous perennial. Native to the South African coast it has deep red to pink (rarely white) flowers with narrow backward-curving petals and long slender red stamens.

It is also known as *Berglelie* (Afrikaans), Golden tulip, Jersey lily, *Liss-Guernesiaise* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Nerina* (Afrikaans), Red nerina, Red nerine, and Spider lily.

*Sarniensis* means ‘of or from the island of Guernsey (in the Channel Islands) which was once known as Sarnia’.

Debate continues as to how Guernsey lily arrived in Europe. Central to the argument is a legend that contends that in about 1650 the bulbs arrived in Guernsey. While the underlying theme is constant several variations are then told. Firstly the legend can vary on the ship’s point of departure. Some suggest that a Dutch East Indiaman returning home to the Netherlands from Japan had the bulbs buried in her ballast (which supported the belief held among some before the legend’s emergence that the flower’s native home was Japan). Others focus on the ship sailing north from the South African Cape from where they suggest some of her crew came. One constant does arise however – that the ship foundered off Guernsey. Here either the bulbs were washed ashore where eventually they burst into flower or they were presented to Island residents by the survivors, an appreciative captain and crew. In any event it is claimed that Guernsey residents cultivated these bulbs successfully (a success which authorities suggest would have been particularly unlikely if the bulbs had spent some time in sea water). Another piece of Guernsey folklore tells how a fairy king brought the bulb as a present to the Island when he came to carry away a young lass with whom he had fallen in love.

Across the Channel in England explanations for the flower’s appearance on Guernsey were far murkier. Spurious claims seem to have been made at the Oxford Botanic Garden in the 1650s (when Cromwell was heading the Country) involving General John Lambert (1619-1684). Certainly this English Roundhead had the flowers growing in his Wimbledon garden in the 1650s (it is suggested that they had been imported from France). It then seems that some authorities suggested that when the monarchy was restored in 1660 Lambert took bulbs with him into exile – an exile supposedly passed in Guernsey. But such rumours are held to have offended a Royalist Professor of Botany at Oxford, one Robert Morison who in 1680 received the doubtful credit for another version of the aforementioned legend. Apparently Morison was loathe to concede that a Roundhead could have played any significant role in the bulb’s introduction to and eventual naturalisation on Guernsey. Records suggest however that General Lambert was actually tried in 1662 (after incarceration in the Tower of London) and sentenced to imprisonment on Drake’s Island off Plymouth where he remained until his death. Thus any controversies in Oxford seem a little thin – and the means and timing of Guernsey lily’s introduction to Britain and the Channel Islands, even if not to France and the European mainland, remain shrouded in rumour and hearsay.

The flower is the national flower for Guernsey, one of the Channel Islands off the northern French coast. It also features in the crest of a Canadian city in south-western Ontario that takes its name, Sarnia, from the old Roman name for Guernsey.

In the year 2000 the Island of Guernsey issued a 26p. stamp depicting the Guernsey lily in a series on the Island's flowering bulbs.