

Pilea peperomioides

Mirror Grass, Chinese Money Plant, UFO Plant, Missionary Plant

镜面草

The Chinese Money Plant has really only come to notice in Australia in the last three or four years, and yet has long been cultivated in China. More curiously, it has been a popular house plant in Scandinavia for decades. The story of this charming and entertaining, indoor plant is quite intriguing.

The *Flora of China* lists the Chinese Money Plant, *Pilea peperomioides*, as rare and possibly endangered, known from shaded, moist rocks in forests, from 1,500 to 3000 metres above sea level, in the



Cang Mountains - 苍山 - of south-western Sichuan and Western Yunnan, an area of great species diversity.

In the western world, we know this plant as *Chinese Money Plant*, no doubt because of the similarity of the rounded, glossy leaves to coins. In China, it's known as *Mirror Grass* – 镜面草, as the glossy green, shield-like leaves are considered to resemble the mirrors used by ancient



Illustration: Ji ChaoZhen, Sun YingBao, eFlora of China:
http://www.efloras.org/object_page.aspx?object_id=50361&flora_id=2

immortals. There is a golden dot on the leaf where the leaf stalk (petiole) joins the centre of the leaf, so it is also called by some *Golden Thread Grass* – 金线草。

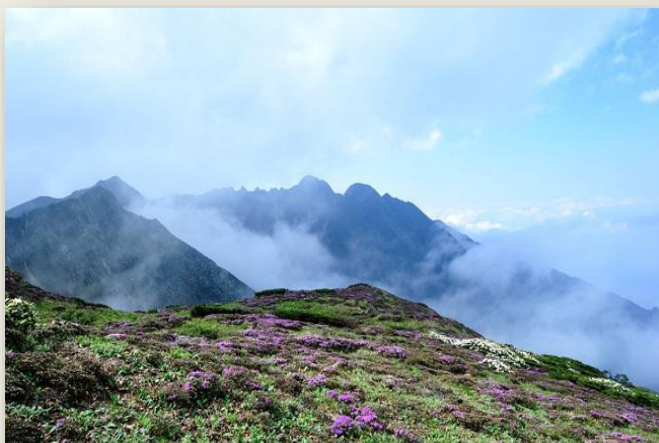
The Chinese Money Plant has only recently become well known in England, North America and Australia, but it is already very popular as a *must have* indoor plant, and surprisingly expensive. The story of its arrival in England, describes a circuitous route. In 1978, a specimen was sent to Kew for identification by a lady from Northolt, an historic town in the London Borough of Ealing. Initially it had botanists at Kew completely baffled, as

it was totally unknown to them. It was eventually recognised as *Pilea peperomioides*, described in 1912 by German botanist Friedrich Diels. Kew did not hold any pressed specimens, but there were specimens in Edinburgh, collected in Yunnan, China, in 1906 and in 1910, by Scottish botanist George Forrest. These were borrowed from Edinburgh and were used to confirm the identification. But how did living plant material get from China to London?



George Forrest

Specimens of the Chinese Money Plant continued to arrive in Kew, and eventually, an article



Cang Shan Mountains, south-western Yunnan, China.

in the *Sunday Telegraph*, 1993, asking for information, elicited numerous responses; one proved especially promising. It seems that the first live plant was brought to Cornwall from Norway by a nine-year-old English girl who had stayed in Norway with a family whose daughter had been her family's au pair girl.

Scandinavian botanists visiting Kew were shown specimens of *Pilea peperomioides*, but it was unknown to them until a Norwegian botanist, Lars Kers, of the Bergius Botanic Gardens, Stockholm, realised that he had it growing in his own house as an indoor plant! He then turned to Swedish television for help, and arranged for them to air a request for information. It turned out that it was an extremely popular house plant in Sweden and he received more than 10,000 letters.



Agnar Espegren, the missionary who brought *Pilea peperomioides* from China to Scandinavia in 1946, and his wife, Olga.
https://nbl.snl.no/Agnar_Espegren

At last, botanists were able to establish the final link. In 1944, the Norwegian ambassador to China ordered all Norwegian missionaries to leave China. At the time, missionary Agnar Espegren and his family lived in Nanyang, Hunan Province. They were flown in an American transport aircraft to Kunming, the capital of Yunnan, in south-western China. While waiting further onward transport to Calcutta, he obtained a live plant, it is presumed from a local market, packed it carefully and took it with him. They lived in Calcutta for close to year, and it was not until March 1946, well after the end of the war, that they were able to return to Norway with their *Pilea peperomioides* still alive!! He gave cuttings and plants to friends throughout Norway, hence one of its common names is *Missionary Plant*! An amazing story, a plant scarcely known to science and yet gracing households across Europe.

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Baike.baidu.com: 镜面草:

<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E9%95%9C%E9%9D%A2%E8%8D%89/2568385>

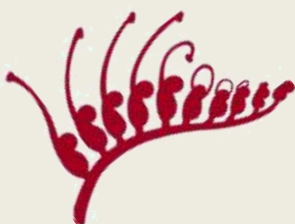
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