

THE TAHITIAN TIARE

The Tahitian tiare flower is a symbol of welcome offered to newcomers.

The first Polynesians discovered it on reaching the shores of their final homeland, today tourists can see it as they come in to land at Tahiti-Fa'a'a.

The tiare is a heritage flower in French Polynesia.

Its name 'tiare' means flower in Tahitian. It is also a veritable tribute to the emblem of Tahiti. Its full name is tiare maohi or *Gardenia taitensis* and it is a member of the large Rubiaceae family. This little shrub with evergreen foliage, produces a multitude of divine smelling flowers each year. Its leaves are green and shiny as if varnished. On the same bush, 5 or 10 petalled flowers blossom, whose petals range from 3 to 5cm in length and are arranged in the form of stars. Its flowers are luxurious and pure white in colour. The tiare often grows on dry grounds by the sea, reminiscent of its natural origins on the coral coastlines. Only certain bushes produce seeds, however, and so reproduction is essentially achieved through layering. Its flowers are picked as buds before sunrise in order to preserve their freshness. These flowers are then used in traditional practices, where they are macerated in baths for the relief of all kinds of ailments, particularly those in which pain is intense. They are also used to fragrance the monoi oil used in body and hair care; while its addition to massage oil is positively intoxicating. Indeed, the tiare is a feature in all areas of daily life where pleasure and harmony are desired. Traditionally the houses, beds and wardrobes of young married couples were even covered in tiare flowers for a month, to help those couples find happiness.

There are also numerous legends where the tiare flower holds a special place, as of course it was created by Tane, the god of beauty; many proverbs hinting at its purity and sincerity and ability to ennoble even the humblest of actions. Even today, if a tiare flower appears in a premonitory dream, this is taken very seriously! From Gaugin to the contemporaries, painters have also honoured it on their canvasses, while graphic artists have given it prime position on their sarong fabrics. Always present on joyful occasions, in the form of necklaces or crowns, the tiare is furthermore symbolic of celebration and the secret language of lovers. When worn behind the left ear it means that your heart has been taken, while behind the right means that your heart remains to be taken...

The Tiare 'Apetahi (*Apetahia raiateensis*), from the Campanulaceae family, is another shrub, which only grows on the Te Mehani plains (300 hectares) on the island of Raiatea, situated 200km to the west of Tahiti. Its flowers, with no particular scent and with petals blossoming only on one side ('apetahi' literally means 'profile'), are the emblem of this "sacred" island. A legendary plant in Polynesian culture, it is also, however, a victim of its own success, seeing a continuous decline in its populations (13% per year) in the wake of the harvesting of its flowers and sometimes branches. Today, this shrub is thus also a symbol of the endemic flora of French Polynesia that are threatened by extinction. Unlike the Tahitian Tiare, which is commonly grown, the 'apetahi has been protected since 1996 by the regulations in force in French Polynesia; harvesting its flowers and leaves or causing damage to its branches or indeed to any part of the plant or its environment are therefore prohibited.