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REPORT

BEAUTY



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NATURAL WONDERS

Beauty brands turn to rare plants and precious materials to enhance luxury products



Tiny flowers that blossom just below the icy summit of one of Switzerland's highest mountains. A shrub that survives the months-long dry season of Africa's Burkina Faso. Delicate orchids that thrive on the high steppes of northern India and China.

Excerpts from the latest issue of *Weird and Wonderful Nature?* Winners of the Plant of the Year Awards? No, these are a few of the rare and precious ingredients making their way into luxury skincare products and, their creators hope, on to our bathroom shelves.

As the quest for youthful-looking skin continues unabated, cosmetics brands are

exploring farther, higher and deeper than ever before to find that miracle element that will erase wrinkles, restore radiance and lift our sagging jowls.

Some, like La Prairie, are heading for the hills. A team led by Dr Daniel Stangl, an active mountaineer and the Swiss skincare brand's director of innovation, recently discovered two so-called survivalist plants – saxifraga oppositifolia and soldanella alpina – thriving in the ice and snow of The Dom mountain.

The team partnered with a Swiss nursery specialising in high-alpine plants to grow and harvest the delicate flowers, then combined

them with extracts of snow algae – another high-altitude plant that thrives in extreme conditions – to develop the hydrating and resilience-boosting complex at the core of the new Cellular Swiss Ice Crystal Cream and Cellular Swiss Ice Crystal Dry Oil.

"To be able to capture the youth-protecting properties and adaptive nature of the three survivalist plants and combine those with revolutionary technologies of modern skincare is exceptional," Stangl says.

"When it comes to the development of new products for La Prairie, no cost is spared, no research left undone, no frontier is left



Pearls, gold and flowers add to the allure of luxury creams. Photographer: Tim Wong @ wongtim.com. Post Production: Tung Ng @ wongtim.com. Stylist: Christie Simpson

SKINCARE

La Prairie Cellular Swiss Ice Crystal Cream and Dry Oil



Tatcha Indigo Soothing Renewal Treatment



unexplored in our quest for agelessness," adds Lynne Florio, global brand president. "Our clients pay a premium for the best in their skincare, and they expect the highest level of performance."

Yves Saint Laurent researchers scaled Morocco's Atlas Mountains, where they discovered a particular strain of saffron, also known as "red gold", that is rich in skin-regenerating glycans. The resulting Or Rouge cream, available at Harrods for £275 (HK\$3,499), will launch in Hong Kong in September.

Guerlain, for its part, has staked its claim on orchids, crisscrossing the globe to discover rare species to add to its Geneva-based Orchid Library.

Its newly released Orchidée Impériale Eye and Lip Cream draws on the age-defying powers of the Dendrobium chrysotoxum, or gold orchid, grown in the company's Tianzi Exploratory Nature Reserve on the mainland.



Dior Dreamskin uses extracts of opilia (far left) to reduce dark spots.

For its new Dreamskin "perfect skin creator", Dior turned to the opilia shrub, found in Burkina Faso, and the longoza, a flower growing in the tropical forests of southeast Madagascar.

"Extract of longoza, the fascinating flower and signature ingredient of Capture Totale skincare, benefits from natural self-regenerating power," says Dior's scientific communication director, Edouard Mauvais-Jarvis, who notes that opilia extract acts as an active ingredient and a carrier to penetrate the skin.

These are just two of several rare flowers cultivated at the Dior Gardens, an international network of plots chosen for the quality of their soil, water and climate. They include the Surkhan-Darya Garden in Uzbekistan that grows the jisten wildflower – used by locals to protect their skin against the harsh climate and in Dior's Hydra Life range – and Madagascar's Ambohidray Garden that grows centella, a plant known locally for its healing properties and also used in Hydra Life products.

Of course, making skin salves from plants and flowers is nothing new. So what makes these modern versions so prized?

"The use of luxury or exotic ingredients for medicinal and cosmetic purposes has been around since ancient times," explains Dr Julia Tzu, clinical assistant professor of dermatology at the New York University School of Medicine. "The use of similar luxury ingredients today differs from the past in the sense that some of the anti-ageing benefits touted are loosely to moderately based on some level of scientific evidence."

Whether that translates to flawless skin, Tzu notes, is still to be confirmed. "The truth is that antioxidants can be extracted from any plant. I'm not aware that there has been any study that has provided compelling evidence that survivalist plants and orchids contain a higher content of or stronger antioxidants than other plants to theoretically be more beneficial to the skin," she says.

For Tatcha founder Victoria Tsai – whose Indigo Collection can be traced to samurai who wore a layer of indigo-dyed cotton under their armour to heal wounds – the focus is on reviving ingredients that are "time-tested, if forgotten by modern skincare".

"I believe – and I hope – that the shift [toward incorporating rare natural ingredients] is born from an appreciation for skin as the body's largest organ. We all instinctively believe in the wisdom of ancient people when it comes to our bodies and health. Diets are returning to our ancestors' palates, yoga has long been popular, many people are reliant on traditional Chinese medicine," she says. "These treatments are



Pearl extract is the key ingredient in Shiseido Future Solution LX Superior Radiance Serum (below left) and Chanel Le Blanc Concentrate.



Chantecaille Gold Energizing Eye Recovery Mask (left) and Omorovicza Gold Hydralifting Mask



thousands of years old, so we know there is truth to them." Tatcha's new hand cream, body butter and soothing treatment are made from indigo grown on a small, family-run farm on the banks of the Yoshino River in Shikoku, Japan. Besides healing wounds, the products have been shown to help flush away toxins and inhibit enzymes that cause pain and inflammation.

Several other luxury brands are turning to ancient ingredients for cutting-edge whitening and anti-ageing formulas. Chanel's new Le Blanc Concentrate boasts an extract from akoya pearls cultivated for two years off the western coast of Japan, while Shiseido's Future Solution LX Superior Radiance Serum draws on a Pearl Hybrid Complex extracted from high-quality Hanadama pearls. Helena Rubinstein's Life Pearl Cellular Sumptuous Cream takes its inspiration from the royal black pearl from the deep seas surrounding Polynesia.

"Perhaps due to their mysterious and enchanting iridescence, the usage of pearls for skincare has been practised before modern times. Today, there is some science to back the claim that pearl extract may have a positive impact on the skin," says Tzu, citing studies showing evidence of wound healing, bone formation and skin-barrier protection.

Gold is also making a resurgence, as seen in Chantecaille's new Gold Energizing Eye Recovery Mask, Omorovicza's Gold Hydralifting Mask, and Orlane's Elixir Royal anti-ageing serum. Touted for its anti-inflammatory and radiance-boosting properties, this precious ingredient doesn't come without potential side effects.

"One of the more concerning ones that I have encountered in my speciality is a condition called chrysiasis, in which gold deposits in the skin and causes discoloration," explains Tzu, who also cautions against using gold nano-particle creams if you plan to have laser procedures due to the risk of further discoloration.

While Tzu sees little evidence that newly discovered plants or carefully cultivated pearls are any more effective than more mainstream skincare offerings – think vitamin C, retinol/ tretinoin and glycolic acid – the rarity of the ingredients themselves is often enough to drive their appeal.

"As consumers, access to products with rare and exotic ingredients makes us feel special," she says. "There's this magical, romanticised association with these ingredients, akin to a modern elixir of youth. Once you start dissecting down the exact science and chemistry, and once the ingredients become common and mainstream, the allure diminishes."