

Economic botany in the Indian Ocean:
official and unofficial botanical gardens on
Ile de France and Ile de Bourbon under the
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Muir, Stewart John

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Description	<p>France was late to enter the European race for empire in Asia, but it was the earliest nation to employ colonial research gardens to organize the push eastward. The French botanical vanguard settled on the Mascarene Islands in the Indian Ocean where, beginning in the 1730s, a series of gardens contributed to France's imperial fortunes and provided a model for later plant research networks in other European empires. In spite of past interpretations of French colonial science, there emerges a compelling argument that a dynamic interest in practical applications of scientific knowledge was present in the Indian Ocean region during this period. Botanical gardens on Ile de France and Ile de Bourbon performed roles central to the direction of overall French colonial activities. Applied botanical gardens helped develop colonial economies. They exchanged plants with other French colonies, notably in the West Indies. They also provided information and plants, for various purposes, to the metropole. The botanical gardeners of the Mascarenes also represented France to other nations, functioning on its behalf as botanical diplomats sharing knowledge and specimens with foreign countries. This period of economic botanizing ended, for France, in 1810 with the loss of its Mascarene colonies to the British.</p>
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