

Title: Tanzanite, a Violet-Blue Gem From East Africa, Is So Hot It Is the First Gem Added to the Birthstone List Since 1912.

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DALLAS -- Among the important gems discovered in the last 90 years, only one has been added to the official birthstone list: Tanzanite, a violetish-blue gem that often resembles fine sapphire.

Tanzanite has been adopted as a December birthstone by the American Gem Trade Association (<http://www.agta.org/>) and shares its last-month-of-the-year membership with turquoise and zircon.

"Affordability and distinctive beauty have earned this gem a status that rivals sapphire's," says Douglas Hucker, AGTA's executive director.

Discovered in Tanzania in the mid-1960s, tanzanite is mined only in the large hilltop area where it was first found. To honor its single-source availability, Tiffany & Co., which introduced tanzanite to the world in 1968, named it after its East African birthplace.

"Although the Tiffany & Co. connection gained the newcomer worldwide publicity, tanzanite has won international popularity on its own merits in the last decade," Hucker says.

Depending on whether it is cut to emphasize its blue or violet color component, tanzanite can resemble the finest royal-blue sapphire or hint at amethyst. Such color versatility has endeared this member of the zoisite family to leading jewelry designers in America, Europe and Japan.

"Once tanzanite became a staple gem, and once supplies showed no sign of letting up, it seemed as worthy of membership on the birthstone list as aquamarine and sapphire, the birthstones for March and September," says Hucker. "All of the major industry associations agreed that the public would respond positively to a dynamic new birthstone choice for December."

True, but amending the birthstone list is like amending the Constitution. There's got to be compelling reason and wide support. The last time the birthstone list was revised was 1912, when jewelry industry leaders met to give gems discovered since the formulation of the traditional list a shot at birthstone status.

"Only a few newcomer gems like alexandrite made the 1912 list," says Hucker. "That tanzanite has been given birthstone status shows the degree to which this gem is revered by the trade and public alike."

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