

Where did our favourite plants come from?

A synopsis of the online talk given by Marion Dale of Crewkerne u3a.

The **Romans** brought medicinal plants such as camomile, marshmallow, foxglove, and opium poppy as well as those for eating- fruits such as apples, sweet plums, medlars (these are left on the tree until almost rotten) and sweet chestnuts from which a flour was made to make biscuits.

They also cultivated leeks, asparagus, cabbages and globe artichokes. When the Romans left, the cultivation of these was taken over by the monasteries.

Box was native to southern England (Box Hill) but the Romans used box for low hedging and topiary. Most people didn't have gardens but grew a few vegetables such as hemlock, ground elder (used as a salad and cooked vegetable), Roman nettle (these were fibrous and could be made into cloth) on scrub land.

Returning **Crusaders** from the Holy land and the Mediterranean brought back plants usually as seeds. These included stocks, Madonna lilies and pot marigolds, hollyhocks, honesty, poppies and anemones. Culinary herbs such as thyme, sweet marjoram, soapwort (which creates a lather naturally in water and was used for washing clothes), and lavender. This has a very concentrated oil and was used as a disinfectant even in WW1.

Medieval gardens in castles, featured flowery roses such as the white *Rosa gallica* but most people were growing plants such as beans for vegetable stews.

Fortified manor houses from the 15th Century onwards, heralded the onset of plant discoveries. **Adventurers** such as Columbus in the 1490's, Raleigh in the 1560's and Drake in the 1580's introduced tobacco, potatoes, chocolate and liquorice.

Snowdrops came from the Ukraine, Echinops from S. Europe and Asia, delphiniums from Siberia and sunflowers from America.

Gardens then became formal and the wealthy, especially royalty employed their own gardeners. In the 1600's **John Tradescant** introduced tulips (the striped petals of some varieties are caused by a virus and cannot be re-created through seeds), horse chestnuts, hellebores and lilac.

Other species introduced by the Tradescants were rudbeckia, stag's horn, false acacia, passion flower and morning glory from S. America. Morning glory seeds were fermented in water by the Aztecs. It has LSD-like properties and when drunk enabled them to communicate with the Sun god. Modern varieties don't have this property!

In the 1700's plants were brought from China and Japan: camellias and magnolia which like acid soil, weeping willow and weeping pear from Turkey, Daphne from N. Africa, Agapanthus from S. Africa and verbena from S. America.

Captain Cook and Joseph Banks sent tree ferns, everlasting straw flowers, bottle brush plants and eucalyptus from their travels to Australia.

Plant hunting became common. **Robert Fortune** brought back wisteria (that from Japan grows anti clockwise, from China clockwise). Chocolate vine (smells of chocolate), skimmia, kerria, spindle tree, escalonia and Japanese knotweed. This is very intrusive and is a notifiable species! If you are unlucky enough to have this in your garden it has to be declared on any property sales form.

Plant hunting became big business. The **Veitches** in their catalogue introduced 1500 new species including clematis, acers and hydrangeas.

The **Lobb brothers** brought in monkey puzzle trees and California redwoods (called Wellingtonias in this country) and orchids. By this time the wealthy had glasshouses in which exotics could be grown.

The trend for arboretums grew, here specimen trees could be displayed e.g. at Westonbirt.

In Victorian times parks and gardens developed due to a social movement to encourage people to exercise. Bedding plants were used – as annuals in this country but in their native countries they would have been perennials.

In the 1900's plants like the giant cowslip and Himalayan blue poppies were introduced and breeding programmes began.

Today we have seed banks like the one at Kew to maintain plant species and prevent them becoming extinct.

Any new plants imported today have to have a 'Plant passport' to try and avoid problems caused in the past by the introduction of species which later became invasive.