

# The oldest inhabitants

By R. W. Sidwell

It is not always realised how recent are the origins and introductions of many of our best-known garden plants. The chrysanthemum did not reach us from the Far East until the early part of last century and the large flowered types arrived from Japan around 1860. It is only recently that the name "Japanese" has been dropped from chrysanthemum shows for this class of flower.

That supposedly English flower, the rose, is almost totally un-English. The modern hybrid teas and floribundas are derived substantially from species native to the Far East and Eastern Europe and the early development took place outside these islands. It was not until the late 19th century that British breeders made substantial contributions to the rose.

One could write in similar vein about many of our other popular flowers. There is, however, a solid core of old garden plants, some native to Britain, and some introduced in Tudor times or earlier, which are still to be found in our gardens, and these have an especial appeal.

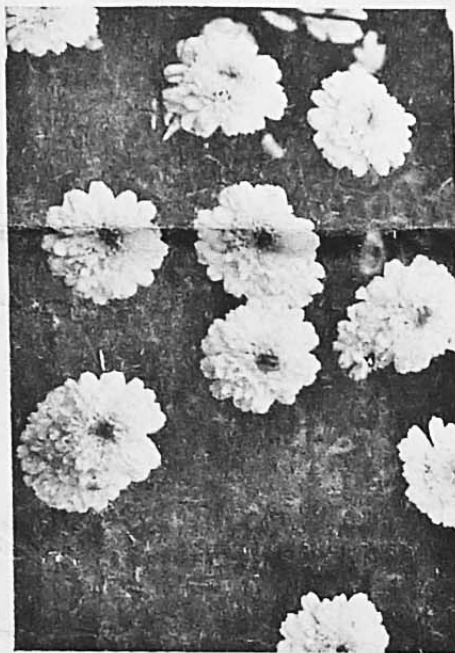
In some cases breeding and development over the last 300 years has obscured the original types. This applies particularly to the carnation. The modern perpetual carnation is a product of the last 100 years and the one-time popular border carnation with its smooth edged petals and perfect form was not known in Tudor times. The carnation was nevertheless the most treasured flower of 17th century gardens and the only flower of consequence to flower after Midsummer.

Plants which have come down virtually unchanged for three to four hundred years include the old double red paeony, the sweet rocket (*Hesperis matronalis*) (alas only the single form is now known), the old short-spurred columbines derived from (*Aquilegia vulgaris*) long before the introduction of the glamorous long-spurred types from California, and foxgloves, monkshoods, and primroses.

The attraction of double flowers was irresistible to the early gardeners. Selections of double forms of the common daisy of our lawns (at least, my lawn) were well-known in early times and were very like the modern types. Double wallflowers were fashionable and they seem to have been near to that delightful variety we grow today as Harpur Crewe.

Stocks were widely grown but not the modern ten-week type. The stocks of Tudor England were the shrubby, short-lived perennials rather like the present-day Bromptons. Some were indeed treated as annuals for, as Parkinson tells us, they "dyeth every winter" but some of the best doubles were propagated by cuttings.

Hollyhocks were much prized, and single and double forms were grown. In the middle of the 19th century the firm of Chater of Saffron Walden carried out breeding and selection with



*Chrysanthemum parthenium*, double feverfew.

hollyhocks and produced lists of many named varieties. These have now all gone and we are left with seed strains very like those of 17th century England.

Many of our old garden plants were grown for medicinal purposes. This applies particularly to the Feverfew (*Chrysanthemum parthenium*) which has recently attracted interest as a cure for migraine. I would not comment on that use but it is such an excellent garden plant, especially in the double form, that I would not leave it out of any collection of old garden plants.

*Lychnis chalconica*, said to have been brought by the crusaders, and certainly in Britain by the 16th century, is worthy of a place in any garden. Its brilliant touch of unfading scarlet is quite distinct in early summer. Here again, a double form once existed. This plant likes a rich soil and plenty of moisture.

Of course, many of the wild species still grown by those who like plants as nature made them have been grown in our gardens for centuries. It could be argued that all plants are as nature made them, man has merely used the process of nature. But that is another story) — *Acanthus spinosus*, *Campanula persicifolia*, *Helleborus foetidus*, *Cyclamen neapolitanum*, *Hepatica triloba*, Winter aconite (*Eranthis hyemalis*), many anemones, London Price (*Saxifraga umbrosa*) and even many European alpine, held in high favour today were to be found in gardens of the early 17th century.

The garden plants of Tudor England were very much flowers of the spring and early summer and for late summer effects they were dependent on foliage to a large degree. But what could be more pleasant than lavender, rosemary, hyssop, santolina and such-like.

A few of the American plants such as potatoes and tobacco, had arrived by Tudor times. The giant sunflower, just as big as it is today, was known; as also were the so-called French and African marigolds in single and

double forms very like the modern varieties, but it was some time before they were widely grown and somehow they seem out of place among the less gaudy plants of Shakespeare's day.



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