Answers to gardening questions

The flowers of Shakespeare

By R. W. Sidwell

Much has been written about Shakespeare's knowledge of plants and some writers have given the impression that the great dramatist was a foremost authority on the plants of his time. Such an assertion hardly stands up to critical examination. Shakespeare probably knew as much about plants as any educated layman of his time but he was not a botanist. In saying this, I do not wish to denigrate Shakespeare. Not that I could if I tried. But why gild the lily?

Perhaps for a better understanding of the position we should consider the place of plants in 16th century England. People lived much closer to the soil than we do today. Fruit and vegetables came not from a frozen pack in a supermarket but from the garden at the back of the house. Drugs and medicines came almost exclusively from plants and the occupations of doctor of medicine, gardener, and apothocary were not sharply defined. Some people operated under all three professions. They were in the front line of the advancement of knowledge and occupied a position in society comparable with the atomic physicist or electronics expert of today. The status of the gardener has certainly fallen during the centuries, but that is another story, not relevant to our present argument.

It is not easy to separate the plants that Shakespeare knew at first-hand from those he had read about or knew only as imported products. Thus ginger, nutmegs and mace were probably known to him only as something bought in a package. The cedar tree could not have been seen in England for something like a century after his death. This brings one to another point of great interest to Shakespearean scholars. How widely did Shakespeare travel? He set many of his plays in the Mediterranean countries. Did he go there in the flesh or were his visits merely vicarious?

In planting a garden with plants mentioned by Shakespeare, one is always up against problems of this sort. Some of the plants cannot be grown out of doors in Britain. Some are undesirable weeds. Few would want to plant stinging nettles. On the latter point, may I divert and note that whereas many present-day gardeners plant buddleias to attract butterflies, few plant stinging nettles to supply food for their caterpillars, which is much more important. End of diversion.

Another problem which people trying to recreate Tudor gardens come up against is that of keeping the garden colourful during the latter half of the summer. The knot garden at Stratford-Upon-Avon is a case in point. No attempt is made to plant this with Tudor flowers. In order to keep it tidy and attractive, it is planted with modern bedding plants. This seems to be fully justified. The formal parterre type of garden, which reached its height at the end of the 17th century, finished up with coloured gravel, sand and even coal dust in the beds because plants were so untidy!

I am sure that the Tudor knot garden has been overglamorised. Even the edging materials gave trouble in the early years. Many materials were tried, inert as well as living plants. Hyssop, santolina, germander and thrift all had their turn but it was not until the late Tudor period that the dwarf box came into the country and the problem of a good permanent edging plant was solved for the next three centuries.

Much as I like to see recreations of old garden designs and styles, I feel that there is room for a garden planted wholly with plants that were known to have been grown in England at the time of Shakespeare, regardless of whether he mentioned them or not. After all, he left out many common plants of great importance, a point which serves to emphasise that he only referred to plants when they served his purpose.

Such a collection of Tudor plants could be planted in a garden of 19th century cottage style, a style much better suited to these plants than the formal knot garden. Most of the plants grown in modern herb gardens have been with us for three or four centuries or more, and many other plants can still be found although many old varieties have, of course, been lost. Changing fashions produce many casualties.

I have said before in these columns that the older gardeners were much pre-occupied with double flowers. Some of these are still with us. Double daisies, paeonies and buttercups can be found in forms very like, if not identical with, those of Tudor times. Columbines with multiple nectaries fitted one into the other like a stack of empty ice-cream cornets are still with us. I have gone to much trouble to keep my stock of these plants pure by banning all modern long-spurred hybrids and most of the forms illustrated in the early works have now naturalised themselves with me.

A more difficult job has been to try to recreate the old double wallflower. We have Harpur Crewe, a double yellow very like the 16th century varieties, but the other colours have almost gone out of cultivation, probably through virus infection. For some years I have been selecting from a double strain which came from Germany. These are not strictly double but the petals are crimped to give a double effect.