

# The Flowers in our Gardens



**R. W. SIDWELL** horticultural consultant, writer, broadcaster, lecturer, photographer, opens a new series, with . . . **DOUBLES**

In this new series we aim at a broad study of garden plants. Their origins, historical background and their rise and fall in popularity as fashions change will be dealt with.

Conservation is very much in the forefront today and it applies as much to garden plants as it does to others in Britain or epiphytic bromeliads in the Amazon forests. We will pay special attention to old varieties in danger of being lost when falling demand makes them unprofitable to propagate. We will seek out the gardens where some of these plants can still be found.

Before the days of the professional plant collector and before botany emerged as a major science in the 16th century, plants, other than useful species, moved slowly from country to country. The peach had passed along the trade routes from its native China into the Mediterranean by Roman times but most of the plants in British gardens in Tudor times were of European origin and had been selected from native species.

In their efforts to improve the wild forms, colour variation and flower size were features sought but another, more spectacular character, much prized, was that of doubling. This, typically, is brought about by the production of petaloid stamens. In the extreme form it leads to sterility and thus no seed is formed. If vegetative propagation, by cuttings or division, is possible all is well. With woody plants budding or grafting overcomes the lack of seed.

It was long thought that some mysterious process could be applied to produce doubles but, in fact, it is merely a question of selecting from each generation seed from the most double forms until full doubling is reached.

We still have today in common cultivation some of these doubles little altered over many centuries. The common daisy of our lawn and fields produced its double forms at least by the 16th century. Gerard (1597) illustrates forms very similar to modern strains, as does Parkinson a few years later (1629). The doubling of a daisy is not due to stamen replacement but to disc florets being converted into ray florets, and fertility is not lost.

A survival from possibly even earlier times is the old double red peony. This is sterile but has such a tenacious hold on life that it can survive years of neglect and hold its own with the fiercest weed competition. The modern peony varieties are based on the Chinese species *Paeonia lactiflora* but these do not cross with the European *P. officinalis*

of which "Old Red" is the double form.

The double form of the field buttercup, *Ranunculus acris*, once "common in every garden throughout England" according to Parkinson, is now seldom seen. The tight hemispherical flowers, very like miniature pom-pom dahlias, led to the popular name "Batchelors Buttons." Other buttercups, notably the bulbous one, have produced double flowers but are now rare.

The double form of the white flowered *R. aconitifolius*, however, is not uncommon in the larger gardens. It goes under the popular name of "Fair Maids of France." It is an attractive plant and is another which has been with us for centuries.

The mention of lesser celandine will cause some gardeners to bristle up a little. The carpet of glossy heart-shaped leaves studded with bright yellow flowers offends many because of the difficulty of eradication. As the foliage dies off in June, the annoyance is short-lived but it is enough to make them avoid the double form, which is really quite a nice little plant, with fully double flowers close to the ground. The little bulbils do seem to get detached, and plants pop up unexpectedly in odd places, but I like it for all that — and so, incidentally, do wood pigeons, who will graze on the foliage if the mood takes them.

To most gardeners, the wallflower is the seed-raised strain, with single flowers used for spring bedding. Double wallflowers have been known for centuries. We still have the sterile double yellow wallflower, Harpur Crewe, which is easily raised from cuttings and has a useful life of about three years. Other sterile doubles exist but are difficult to keep alive, probably through virus infection of the stock.

Strains of seed-producing doubles have probably existed from the earliest days and they apparently attained some popularity in Germany last century. In Britain they have fallen into disfavour and are rarely seen.

Some years ago I acquired some seed of German origin. The resultant crop showed a doubling tendency in about ten per cent of the plants. By seeding from carefully selected plants, the percentage has been raised but, what is much more important, a small proportion have fully double flowers of excellent form and habit, far superior to anything in the original stock.

Whether seed production can be combined with full doubling in this strain remains to be seen. So far some seed has been produced. As



Wallflower "Harpur Crewe" has a perfume at least as good as the singles, and the flowers last longer.

they show little tendency to produce shoots suitable for cuttings, seed does seem to be the only hope.

There are few species of common flowers where some degree of doubling has not taken place at some period. The double marsh marigold is well known and is an excellent garden plant for the moist situation. Another moisture lover is the common Ladies Smock. The double form of this is very attractive. Double red campions are rather untidy as the calyx splits, as sometimes happens with overdoubled pinks and carnations. *Aabis Albida* makes compact tidy clumps of very pure white.

Whilst one can understand the preference many people have for the single forms, it would be very sad if the doubles were lost and it is pleasing to find a wide interest in their preservation.



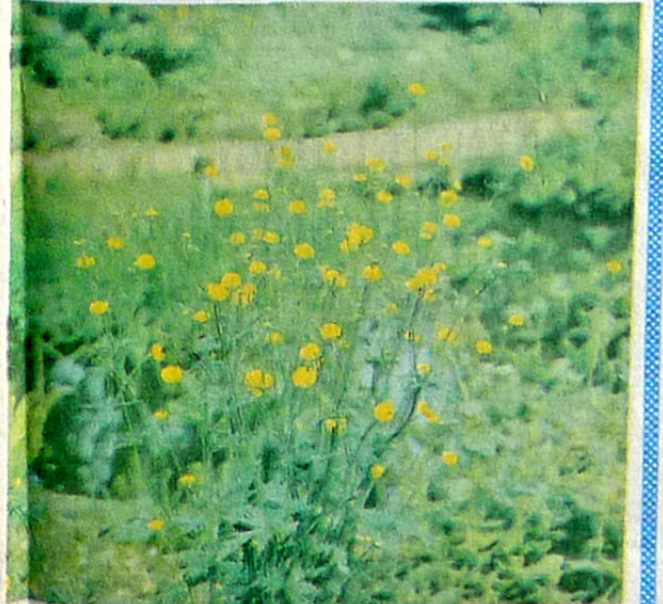
Beds of double daisies at Hidcote.



The double Ladies Smock is quite often found growing wild.



*Arabis albida* is one of the best of "front of the border" plants



Field Buttercup, *ranunculus acris*.