The Flowers in our Gardens

R. W. SIDWELL, horticultural consultant, writer, broadcaster, lecturer, photographer, continues his series

Some early American immigrants

Most people will be aware that potatoes, tobacco and tomatoes reached us from the Americas in Tudor times. These three plants have contributed much to our way of life and seem destined to do so for some time to come.

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The early introductions rarely came to us direct. The Spanish were well ahead of us in colonisation and plants introduced by them became established in Mediterranean countries some time before their introduction to Britain. Sometimes the western origins of these plants was not appreciated.

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Parkinson, for instance, says that to matoes 'growe naturally in the hot countries of Barbary and Ethiopia; yet some report them first brought from Peru a province of the West Indies.' Geographical boundaries were still somewhat vague in the early 17th century and anywhere the other side of the Atlantic and south of the Arctic seemed to pass as 'West Indies' to Parkinson.

Most popular

One of the most popular of modern bedding annuals, the African Marigold, a native of Mexico, acquired its "African" appellation because it became naturalised in North Africa long before its introduction into Britain. Gerard's 1597 illustration and description of the "Great Double African Marigold" makes it clear that the large double flowered marigolds were in existence at that time.

The year of its introduction of modern and the company of the compan

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The year of its introduction into the Mediterranean countries is not known but as it takes some years of selection to produce double flowers from the wild single forms one may assume that the forms brought over by the early Spanish adventurers were garden plants already developed by the native civilisations. The French Marigold had similar origins but reached us via France.

Some of the new world plants were quite

different from anything already growing in Britain and they widened the range of plant form available to gardeners. Such a plant was the yucca. There are numerous species of these in Central America. The first to gloriosa from SE USA. The RHS Dictionary gives the year of its introduction as 1550 but it was still quite rare in Parkinson's time some 70 years later. The yucca are imposing plants and are well suited for growing as isolated specimens on lawns. lawns.

A plant with much legend associated with it is the passion flower. The commonest and hardiest of these, Passiflora caerulea, is native to Central America and the western side of South America. The Spanish Jesuit missionaries imagined that the anatomy of the flower was symbolical of Christ's passion and the early illustrations were modified to suit this end. Parkinson is particularly scatching of these excessive flights of fancy.

There is some confusion as to the date of introduction of the passion flower to Britain. Aiton, the first curaton. Aiton, the first curaton of Kew, who is usually regarded as the authority on such matters gives the year as 1699. This can hardly be correct as Parkinson describes and illustrates it in detail and the 1633 edition of Gerard he records that it "is in good plenty growing with Mistress Tuggy at Westminster." We will hear more about this lady and her late husband at some future date.

Adaptable

When I first became interested in plant history I was puzzled by 18th century references to the primrose tree. I later discovered that this was the evening primrose. Oenothera biennis. This appears to be a common plant on the eastern side of North America It is not in the 1597 Gerard but it was not uncommon by the time of Parkinson. Such an adaptable coloniser would

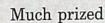
not be long in establishing itself.

The plant most commonly met with today is not the original wild American species but a garden form known as Oe. erythrosepala which appears to be a hybrid or sport of European origin. It has larger flowers and, I think, less scent than the Oe. biennis as I remember it in my early youth.

For many years I

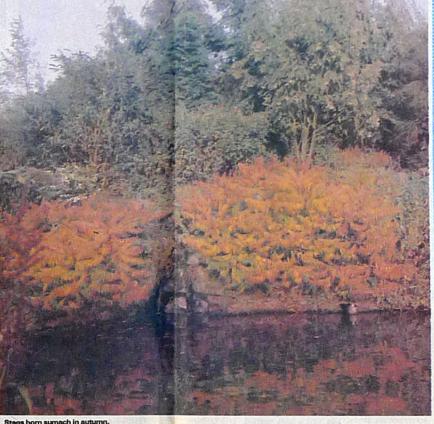
early youth.

For many years I have promised myself a return to those haunts of 60 odd years ago when the still air of a warm summer evening was drenched with the scent of this flower. Such a visit requires courage. One is afraid of shattered illusions.



The common nastur-

tium. Tropaeolum
majus has long been a
commonplace, everyday plant that is almost
despised as a consequence. When first introduced it was much
prized for undoubted
good garden qualities.
The earliest nasturtium
to arrive here, however, was a smaller
flowered species T.
minus. This is a gem of
a plant, daintier than
the common nasturtium. This is the one
seen in some of the 15/
16th century Dutch
flower paintings.
Tropaeolum minus
has been lost to cultiva
has been lost to cultiva
tion more than once
over the years as the
larger species has
taken its place. I
obtained seed of it
some years ago and it
has established itself,
seeding down freely
and emerging in the
late spring when danger of frost is over.
The scarlet T. speciosum is in a different
class. This is a tuberous perennial and is,
seeding down freely
and emerging in the
late spring when danger of frost is over.
The scarlet T. speciosum is in a different
class. This is a tuberous perennial and is,
the sear in the best
gardens scrambling
through yew hedges. It
is happier in the moist
west of Britain than in
the east and takes a
little time to establish.
There appear to be differing opinions as to
when this plant came to
Britain. Some authorities say 16th century
but if that is so it is
doubtful if it became
established and its
reintroduction in the
mid 19th century is the
really effective date.
Another plant of indi-



vidual character that came from the east of North America is the stags horn sumach. It had not been in Britain long when Parkinson wrote his "Paradisi." He comments on the remarkable resemblance of the soft, downy but thick shoots to antlers of a deer in velvet. He also observes that the shrub suckers freely "whereby it is mightily increased," a view shared today by many a gardener.

A sensation

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It is nevertheless one of our best shrubs for autumn colour and is best planted where it can have room to develop, otherwise it can show a lot of bare legs.

The glant annual sunflower must have created a sensation when seen for the first time. According to reports it must have been as large as it is today. This plant is of South American origin but it had spread widely through the continent by the time of the early European colonisation. It was in Britain before the end of the 16th century.

The self clinging virginian creeper with its brilliant autumn colour is one of the most useful coverers of bare walls. The first one to come over was the one with compound leaves, now known as Parthenocissus quinquifolia. It has had a variety of names over the years.

