

The Flowers in our Gardens

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

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.

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.

Parkinson, for instance, says that tomatoes "grew 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 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 reach us was *Yucca 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.

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 scathing 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 curator 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 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.

Much prized

The common nasturtium, *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 cultivation 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 often seen 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-



Stags horn sumach in autumn.

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

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 giant 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 quinquefolia*. It has had a variety of names over the years.



Passiflora caerulea, the passion flower.