

# The Flowers in our Gardens

R. W. SIDWELL, continuing his summer series, writes about Some Plants from the Mediterranean.

As the cradle of western civilisation the countries of the Mediterranean have a long history of plant cultivation. Some of the plants e.g. the peach, had originated with the even earlier civilisation of China and had reached the West via the overland trade routes. The Romans doubtless brought many of their plants to Britain and the aromatic and medicinal herbs survived the Dark Ages here in the gardens of the religious houses.

The real interest in plants as things of ornament in Britain dates from the Tudor period and naturally many of the plants grown had their origins in the Mediterranean countries.

Dry hillside scrub and shrub thickets provide the "macquis" plant communities, typical members of which are the cistus species. These have long been popular in British gardens and one cannot help thinking how they would have enjoyed this 1983 summer if the 1981-82 winter had not killed most of them off! Actually the low growing *Cistus salviaefolius* survived that winter here with the protection of a snow cover as did a small plant of *C. cyprus*.

There are few flowers as beautiful as the cistus. The spherical buds swell gradually until suddenly they burst and the petals, like crumpled tissue paper, straighten themselves out until ne'er a crease remains. By the end of the day the petals have fallen and the next bud in line will repeat the process tomorrow.

*C. salviaefolius* was in Britain by 1548. It is one of the best of the smaller white-flowered species. *C. ladaniferus* has larger white flowers with a purple blotch on each of the five petals. This was known to Parkinson (1629). Many other species were introduced in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Perhaps our most beautiful species, but, alas, one of the more tender, is *C. x purpureus*. This is a hybrid between *C. ladaniferus* and *C. villosus*, the latter providing the rosy purple colour of the hybrid. It was in cultivation by 1790.

The bindweeds include some of our worst weeds, but there is nothing binding or weedy about *Convolvulus cneorum*. This is a dainty little shrub with silvery leaves which look almost willow-like. The silvery effect is produced by hairs which lie flat on the leaf surface. When viewed from the right angle the light reflection is quite bright. Chance the angle and it is dull — a shot silk effect. The flowers, almost white with a light purple flush on the outside, are the typical funnel-shape of the genus.

Flowering time is somewhat uncertain and the peak may occur at any time during summer and autumn and may continue into the winter in mild seasons.

It is a plant that makes an instant

appeal and it is not surprising to find that it was introduced to Britain as long ago as 1640. In the wild it appears to be confined to the countries of southern Europe and it fails to survive hard winters here but given a warm sheltered corner and a little protection it will come through about two winters in three on average.

One of the reasons for the winter loss of *C. cneorum* is its reluctance to break from below ground. Another beautiful species, *C. mauritanicus*, breaks readily from its roots provided the frost has not penetrated deeply. This makes spreading mats, covered with lavender blue flowers for most of the summer. Perhaps we should not include it in Mediterranean plants. As its name indicates it belongs to the hinterland of N.W. Africa. I am not sure how near it gets to the coast, or to which coast, but it is a beautiful plant which deserves a mention.

Plants with a long history of cultivation by the early civilisations inevitably collect myths legends and stories. Such a plant is the Judas tree (*Cercis siliquastrum*). This is reputedly the tree on which Judas hanged himself. In Britain it rarely makes a large enough tree for a really good gibbet and even in its home country of the Eastern Mediterranean it is not a big tree. It is possible, of course, that Judas was afraid of heights.

This is not an uncommon tree in the larger gardens. It bears masses of rosy purple, open pea-like, flowers just as the leaves are appearing in the spring. Its introduction into Britain dates from the 16th century. For a plant with such a long history of cultivation it is surprising that no medicinal or other uses have been



*Convolvulus Mauritanicus* in the rose garden at Sissinghurst Castle.

found for it, but the early writers emphasise that it has no such virtues.

In contrast *Laurus nobilis*, the bay tree, has uses in abundance. This is usually supposed to be the true laurel of the ancients and to be the plant from which the crowns of laurel were made. It has also been used as a flavouring in cooking from earliest times, as it still is in the best cookery circles.

When well established, with a deep root run, the bay tree makes rapid growth but confined to tubs on the dusty steps of a London hotel the clipped heads may grow a mere inch

or so per year. The 1981-82 winter killed my trees to ground level but by the end of summer 1982 the young growth was over six feet high.

The bay is probably native throughout the whole Mediterranean region but it has been so long cultivated that it is not easy to separate the wild from the domesticated.

Another aromatic leaved shrub but with showy scented flowers is the myrtle (*Myrtus communis*). This was esteemed by the ancients as an emblem of love and peace and was favoured for wedding bouquets.

It has been grown in Britain from Tudor times and is among our choicest shrubs for sheltered sites. Its one-inch-wide creamy white flowers with their prominent boss of stamens are just at their best as I write (August 10). The winter before last killed it to ground level and as it flowers on wood made the previous year this is the first flowering we have had since 1981.

Students of plant use are familiar with aphrodisiacs and love potions. Less familiar are the inducers of chastity. *Vitex agnus-castus*, the chaste tree, is supposed to have such properties. The name monk's pepper suggests a use among those who choose a monastic life.

Gerard writes at some length on the attributes of this plant and suggests its use for those who would "willingly live chaste". He is not such a spoilsport as to suggest its secret use on the unsuspecting!

The chaste tree is not very common but is sometimes found as a wall shrub in the older and larger gardens. There is a particularly fine specimen at Kew.



*Cistus Cyprus*. The yellow centre and purple blotches contrast with the pure white of the petals.