

# The Flowers in our Gardens

By R. W. Sidwell

## Plants from the Golden West

The Pacific side of the Americas presented a challenge to the early botanists. A few live plants had reached Europe by the late 18th century and many dried herbarium specimens had been collected. Captain Cook had competent botanists on each of his three voyages and on his last, ill-fated venture, he had, in 1779, reached the Behring Straits but little plant collecting had been done on the North American Coast.

George Vancouver was a midshipman on Cook's last voyage and with this training behind him he sailed from Falmouth in April 1791 taking Archibald Menzies with him as surgeon and naturalist. Menzies was a gardener by early training but while working at Edinburgh Botanic Gardens he was able to study as a surgeon at the University. Gardeners, botanists and surgeons were a closely knit group in 16th to 18th century Britain with uncertain lines of demarcation. Surgeons even included barbering in their range of activities. Menzies must have done his medical work well for it is recorded that not one death through ill health occurred during the voyage of almost five years.

It is, however, for his plant collecting and recording that Menzies is best remembered. They sailed via the Cape of Good Hope, South-West Australia and New Zealand, spent enough time in Chile to collect the monkey puzzle tree (*Araucaria araucana*) and in 1792 circumnavigated Vancouver Island. Most of the next two years was spent surveying

the coast from San Francisco northwards. They returned in 1795 via Cape Horn.

Although most of Menzies' collections were dried herbarium specimens he did erect a glass structure on the quarterdeck so that some specimens could be brought back alive.

David Douglas was the first pure plant collector to be sent to the American North-West Coast with the express purpose of collecting live plant material, which in simple terms usually meant seeds. The year was 1825 and between then and 1834 his contribution was extraordinary. His introductions ranged from giant conifers — the biggest trees in the world — to the tiny and ephemeral desert annuals.

In the 1860s William Lobb, a Cornish gardener, was sent by the firm of Veitch to the Pacific Coast. One of his jobs was to collect seeds of *Araucaria* from Chile. A few monkey puzzle trees existed in Britain but vegetative propagation was impracticable if not impossible and new seed was the only way of increase. So successful was Lobb that Veitch found themselves overburdened with them. This resulted in the rash of monkey puzzles of the late 19th century. Many of these were often shabby wrecks within 20 years. Those planted on the deeper richer soils made good specimens and a few still remain, notably at Bicton in Devon.

Lobb's other collections were from North America where he fol-

lowed closely the routes pioneered by Douglas.

How important are these plants to us today? The conifers require an article to themselves. They have changed the face of Britain. When one sees the proliferation of uncontrollable Leyland cypress hedges one wonders if the change is for the better but it must be admitted that fine trees in places where they have room to develop properly are always desirable. The redwood grove at Whitfield, Herefordshire and the wellingtonias of Coombe Abbey near Coventry have the grandeur of a cathedral. And one must remember that the first plantings at Westonbirt were mainly of North American conifers.

California's contribution to British gardens is substantial but, as might be expected, some of the plants are liable to be damaged in severe winters. Twenty nine species of ceanothus grow wild in California and many hybrids of these have been produced in Europe. In 1981-2 winter took heavy toll of ceanothus but it is a rapid grower and is easily replaced. Ceanothus must always be pot grown, planted as young plants and never subsequently transplanted.

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Much of what I have said about ceanothus applies equally to fremontodendron. The variety "California Glory" is said to be hardier than the wild form and its large golden cups are produced at an early age. This is attractive even when out of flower. Its three-lobed leaves are backed with greyish brown down, as are the young shoots.

*Carpentaria californica* an evergreen shrub with large white flowers, is a favourite with many people for a warm corner. *Garrya elliptica* is somewhat hardier. Its dull evergreen foliage is not very interesting but it is enlivened in mid-winter by its six-inch long grey-green catkins. These are the male flowers and it is usually the male form that is grown. The female catkins are shorter and less striking but they are followed by half-inch diameter globular purple capsules covered in dense white down. They are quite striking but few people have even seen them. Few, if any, nurserymen, offer the female form for sale.

The currants and gooseberries are well represented in Western North America. The common flowering currant, (*Ribes rubrum*) was a Douglas discovery and the rather more select fuchsia flowered gooseberry (*Ribes speciosum*) was the first recorded by Menzies although its introduction to Britain is credited to Douglas. There are many other currants in the region, including the yellow flowered *Ribes aureum* but many are of little ornamental value and are rarely seen in British gardens.

Most of the plants we are considering are grown in the wild form or in slightly modified selections of the wild form. A few species, however, have attracted the plant breeder. One of these is the lupin.

The herbaceous perennial lupin (*Lupinus polyphlous*) was introduced from California in 1826. The original form was blue or bluish purple. A white form was also known. By the late 19th century pink forms were appearing. At some time after this, crosses were made with the yellow tree lupin (*Lupinus arboreus*) and a new colour range was opened up.

By the end of the First World War the firm of Downer offered many varieties in a wide colour range. Shortly after this Russel, working on an allotment in York, carried out further breeding and selection to

produce the Russel lupins famous in the 1930s. After the war, popularity declined. Many varieties were lost but a few remain and good strains of mixed seed are still available.

Some plant genera have a limited geographical distribution yet have many species within the area. Such a genus is penstemon with a hundred or so species, mainly in the American North-West. A few straggle across the North Pacific into Western Asia. The main centre for the genus is California which claims nearly 40 species. Many of these are grown in Britain by the alpine specialists. They tend to be unreliable as permanent plants. West English winters account for many losses and they do not withstand our colder winters either.

A large flowered species from Northern Mexico *P. hartwegii* was introduced to Britain in the 19th century and became the chief parent of a race of penstemons suitable for the general flower border. The firm of Forbes of Hawick took the lead in this breeding work at the turn of the century and as recently as 1953 were listing 59 named varieties. The firm has now gone and few of their varieties are still with us. My own penstemons to which I have given bird names, e.g. Raven, Osprey, Flamingo, Blackbird, were raised from some of the Forbes varieties. Some good dwarf strains of large flowered penstemons are sold by the better seedsmen as bedding plants. My experience with these is that they are best treated as annuals as they are not so winter hardy as the Forbes strain.

One of the most attractive of dwarf Californian shrubs is *Diplacus glutinosus* with flowers of a soft buff yellow. A brick red form is sometimes given specific ranks as *D. puniceus*. They are of doubtful hardiness but in a warm spot will survive all but the coldest winters, breaking from below ground as fuchsias do, when the top is killed. They are excellent plants for the cool greenhouse.

There are hardier plants than these which are found in the woodlands of Oregon, Washington and British Columbia. Among these are *Compassia quamash* and its relative *C. leitchlinii*. The bulbs of these were once a staple item of diet for



Another Bredon Springs Penstemon seedling with a bird name

the North-West Indians. I believe that they are still eaten, perhaps as a novelty, rather in the way we gather field mushrooms.

Douglas complained that they were "very windy." Those of us who eat Jerusalem artichokes find the same thing. The Tudor herbalists would describe them as "working in both directions!" Quamash are not normally eaten over here but they provide attractive spikes of blue or creamy white flowers on three-foot

stems in late spring.

The erythroniums or dog's tooth violets are another genus of North West woodlanders. Usually under one foot high with spotted leaves and reflexed petals, they always attract attention. The roots form irregular-shaped tubers which should not be kept too long out of the ground. Unfortunately they are often sold by bulb merchants who treat them as other bulbs. This is fatal.



Penstemon Flamingo — an attractive seedling from Bredon Springs.



Diplacus Glutinosus — a slightly tender Californian sub-shrub.