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Fig. 1 *Rosmarinus officinalis* – rosemary is one of the oldest known medicinal herbs, used centuries ago to enhance mental function and memory. A symbol of fidelity and friendship, it was used at weddings and funerals, for decking churches and banqueting halls at festivals, as incense in religious ceremonies, and in magical spells.

Rosemary extracts are used in cosmetics, and a herbal lotion is said to stimulate hair growth and prevent baldness.

Also used in cooking, apparently it came to represent the dominant influence of the mistress of the house – ‘where rosemary flourished, the woman ruled’ – and it was suspected that some masters damaged the plants to show who was boss.

How many gardening books do you own? Go on, be honest. Far too many, it could be said, if you’re like me. I have four large bookshelves full, and that’s after giving away quite a few during a sort out. And of course the RHS’s Lindley Library has thousands.

How come such an enormous number of gardening books have been written? After all, gardening’s just gardening, isn’t it, a harmless hobby for

plantaholics like us. Well no. Far from it. Surveying the titles one can only conclude that humankind’s relationship with plants is in fact the basis of civilisation.

After hunter-gathering, the deliberate growing of crops meant settlements, and what flourished in one part of the world was a desirable commodity in another, leading to trade. *Seeds of Change*, by Henry Hobhouse

Brought to book

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(1985) relates how five plants changed the world: tea, sugar, cotton, potatoes and quinine. That leaves aside the effects of the spice trade, coffee, cocoa, tobacco and rubber (in 1876 seeds of the rubber tree were smuggled from Amazonia by the British for germination at Kew, leading to the rubber plantations of Malaysia). Maize was another South American introduction. How would Africa feed itself without it?

Plants have been the cause of wars. In *Bizarre Plants* (1974), William Emboden tells how the collecting of ginseng in China some two thousand years ago reached such a pitch that the Chinese and the Tartars fought over the territory where it grew. Which brings us on to medicinal plants. Oh my.

You could fill many bookshelves just with herbals. Without our modern drugs and antibiotics, what else did you treat the sick with? Many of our traditional garden herbs come from the Mediterranean, since the Romans introduced a good number, and anything medicinally important would have had a value, and hence been a tradable commodity. In fact, as the unsurpassed *A Gardener's Dictionary of Plant Names* by A. W. Smith and William Stearn (1972) tells us, any plant with the word 'officinalis' in its Latin name indicates that it would have been bought and sold in the equivalent of ancient pharmacies (fig. 1).

Clearly many plants had qualities believed to affect the human body, and their

colloquial names reflect that: Feverfew, Lungwort, Woundwort, Abscess Root, Self-Heal. For fairly informal information I value *A Country Herbal*, published in 1980 by Lesley Gordon. She weaves together the botanical, historical and medicinal profiles of plants in a pleasing, illustrated book. Can't say I'd consult a herbal rather than make an appointment with the doctor, but for keeping well I swear by aloe vera, cinnamon, garlic, turmeric, Montmorency cherry juice for sound sleep, and cranberry tablets for you know what. Doctors today, and pharmaceutical companies especially, may pour scorn on anything plant based, but what was the original source of aspirin? They still use poppy-based

opiates (fig. 2), digitalis for certain heart problems; and recently rhubarb has been reported to shrink tumours. *A Modern Herbal* by Mrs M. Grieve was published in 1931, and re-issued in 1992. Now that's an encyclopaedic handbook, a treasury nearly a thousand pages long of scholarly information, and if ever civilisation collapses those of us possessing a copy will be privileged indeed.

I don't know how many herbs Mrs Grieve grew herself, but what an age of gardeners she lived in – Gertrude Jekyll, William Robinson, Reginald Farrer, Will Ingwersen, Vita Sackville West, E. A. Bowles. And they all wrote books. If I have a query about a colchicum, Bowles' *A Handbook of Crocus and Colchicum* (1924) is the place to go. He was the world expert. And my guilt at the number of lewisias (fig. 3) I've caused to suffer and die was assuaged by Reginald Farrer's dismissive comment on them in *Alpines and Bog Plants* (1908) 'It is useless to cope with plants who fly beyond any mere soil-requirement, and want you to alter the entire climate of the country before they'll condescend to thrive'. Ah well, if *he* thought that...!

Books enlighten us as to how now-familiar plants came about, and it was another great gardener of that era who helped a favourite shrub of mine into cultivation.

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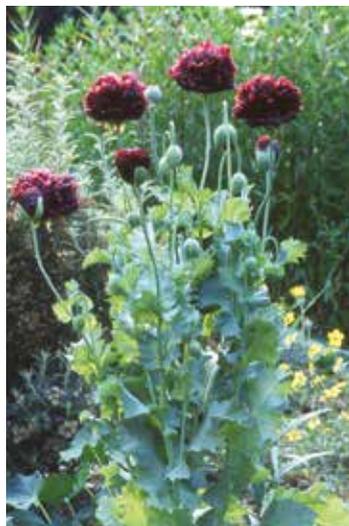


Fig. 2 *Papaver somniferum* – opiates derived from poppies are still used as analgesics in 'scientific' medicine. They are also the basis of some 'recreational' drugs.

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Fig. 3 Lewisias are choosy plants, but at least the experts find them tricky too.

In 1908 the plant explorer Ernest (Chinese) Wilson sent precious seeds of *Ceratostigma willmottianum* (fig. 4) to Ellen Willmott of Warley Place, and she managed to germinate just two. A wonderful burst of blue in late summer, their descendants are a lovely memorial, although of course she has many others. Nurserymen found it did them no harm commercially to name their new plants after that doyenne of the gardening world; (see *Miss Willmott of Warley Place*, by Audrey Le Lievre, 1980).

Graham Stuart Thomas's *Perennial Garden Plants* was my bible when it first came out in 1976, and the number of plants and strains that bear his name are testament to his ability to spot a good 'un (fig. 5). I don't know if he was a Hardy Plant Society member, but many distinguished gardeners such as Beth Chatto and Alan Bloom have been, writing authoritative and helpful books, in company with expert but less famous members: Peter Yeo's *Hardy Geraniums* (2001) and Margaret Stone's *Geraniums* (2015), Jack Elliott's *Bulbs for the Rock Garden* (1995), *The Gardener's Guide to Growing Penstemons* by David Way and Peter James (1998), Derek Fox's *Growing Lilies* (1985), *The Propagation of Hardy Perennials* by Richard Bird (1993) and *Creative Propagation* by Peter Thompson (2005). And

our Society's booklets are invaluable (fig. 6). What a treasury of knowledge from Hardy Planters. And that's before mentioning our vice-president Dilys Davies's excellent *Alliums* (1992), and of course the numerous authoritative books from our distinguished current president, Roy Lancaster.

For us Hardy Planters, growing interesting things is what it's all about. But gardening is woven into social and artistic history, inevitably accompanied by a certain snobbery and one-upmanship. Plant hunters were not only financed by botanical institutions, they were also funded by the well-to-do, who then had the kudos of growing previously unknown curiosities. And boasting about it – think stone pineapples on imposing gates. *Fuchsia magellanica* (fig. 7), with distinctive bell shaped blooms, was so excitingly different

from anything Europeans had seen before that these colourful wonders were bound to have tremendous appeal. As an astute nurseryman named James Lee was swift to realise. Alice Coats relates in her wonderful *Garden Shrubs and Their Histories* (1963) that in 1788 Kew had just been presented with such a fuchsia and, soon after, Lee acquired a plant. Precisely how is questionable, since his romantic story of having bought it off a ship captain's wife was a little fishy. Fuchsias root easily from cuttings (as he'd possibly already discovered), and by the following season his one plant had become three hundred. A good psychologist, he put just two on display, priced at an exorbitant one guinea each. Novelty, beauty and above all scarcity – the prestige of owning one of only two such wonders proved irresistible.



Fig. 4 *Ceratostigma willmottianum* – the Chinese (or hardy) plumbago is a delightful, good-tempered, small shrub.

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Nothing much changes, does it. Fashionable society soon beat a path to his nursery, Lee quietly replacing each sold plant from stock hidden away, until all were gone. He must have been laughing all the way to the bank.

The monetary value of scarce plants famously reached its apogee in the madness of 17th century Dutch tulip mania, related by Anna Pavord in *The Tulip* (1999). We may scoff at one bulb being sold for the price of a grand house, but those Dutch merchants would doubtless split their sides at the gullibility of today's rich paying millions for a stuffed shark or an unmade bed.

Green fingers exist in all levels of society, and cottage gardeners combined an earthy

practicality with a desire for colour and beauty, which is an attractive combination. Especially when it's romanticised. *Victorian Flower Gardens* by Andrew Clayton-Payne and Brent Elliott (1988) has a scholarly text but it's accompanied by Helen Allingham's wonderful paintings of cottagers and their gardens (fig. 8) – fruit trees blossoming, Madonna lilies lining paths, hollyhocks by the door, plus a comely young woman holding a small child or shelling peas with poultry pecking at her feet. I'm not sure the cottagers themselves would have recognised such an idealised picture. Far more convincing are the reminiscences in *Tales of*

the Old Gardeners (1994), compiled by Jean Stone and Louise Brodie, with snippets of information such as how many moleskins it took to make a coat, and 'the parings of horses hooves, purchased from the village blacksmith, put into a tub of water and allowed to decompose, make an excellent and nourishing liquid manure'.

Margery Fish came from a higher social echelon, but her delight at the cottage gardens she found in Somerset, and in her attempt to create her own, is timeless. Her *We Made a Garden* (1956) is something I suggest to those newly bitten by the gardening bug, because her beginner's enthusiasm is so infectious. And if a friend

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Fig. 5 *Rosa* 'Graham Thomas' – voted The World's Favourite Rose in 2009, this is a worthy tribute to a great gardener.



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Fig. 6 *Penstemon* 'Schoenholzeri' (syn. 'Firebird' and 'Ruby') appears identical to 'Andenken an Friedrich Hahn'. David Way commends it as 'outstandingly floriferous' with a 'robust constitution' in *Penstemons* (2006), one of the splendid HPS booklets which give advice on all aspects of growing plants of a particular genus.



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Fig. 7 *Fuchsia magellanica* had huge novelty value in 1788, and was priced accordingly.



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Fig. 8 Helen Allingham's paintings romanticised cottage gardens and set a gardening trend which is still popular.

is ill or in hospital they're lent a precious copy of *Old Herbaceous* by Reginald Arkell (1950), the delightful story of an old gardener, whom you really don't want to believe is fictional.

To raise money for hospices and other charities, small books are often compiled of contributions from celebrities and well-known gardeners. Somewhere I picked up *Superhints for Gardeners* (1993), compiled by Lady Wardington. An assortment of tips, some are useful: using upturned hanging baskets stuffed with straw to protect tender plants in winter, and pouring boiling water into a planting hole to warm up the soil. (Now there's a thought.)

Some are entertaining, such as Hunter Davies's report on how a neighbour was plagued with moles.

'She got rid of them by putting a musical birthday card down their hole', he reports. 'They never came back once they'd heard 'Happy Birthday' for the 300th time.'

Our relationship with plants may be the basis of civilisation, but fortunately it isn't all serious stuff. An American paperback by Henry Beard and Roy McKie (1982) entitled *Garden. ing. n. The art of killing weeds and bugs to grow flowers and crops for animals and birds to eat* is a dictionary of horticultural words. They include: Dianthus – genetic

term for a gardener who possesses two aunts; Freesia – where the excess vegetables are put; Hardy – a plant is said to be hardy if it remains in a nursery long enough to be sold; Vermiculite – obscure order of nuns dedicated to gardening. And Rot – gardening advice.

With the internet we can now easily conjure up a plant image, where it comes from and some information on how to grow it. So have we really collected too many gardening books? Of course not. Let's continue to keep a keen eye out for them in charity shops, secondhand bookshops, and on stalls at fetes and car boot sales. No telling what we might learn. 🌸

Alex Pankhurst tries to put her book-learning into practice in a cottage garden in Essex. She is the author of three books.