

From Russia with... flowers

Jeffrey Bryce

Most gardeners are well aware that British gardens are filled with plants from all corners of the world – the Mediterranean, Turkey, the Himalaya, China, Japan, the Americas, South Africa, Australasia. But perhaps less well known is the contribution to our gardens made by Russia and the Russians. And this is rather surprising, for the first British gardener and plant collector travelled to Russia as early as 1618 – John Tradescant Senior.

Those who know their Russian literature might imagine a land of birch forests, and Tradescant certainly found them, but his main recollection was of the refreshing drink the locals made from the spring rise of birch sap. Understandably he stayed close to his ship, for, unlike our own, the roads were passable only when covered in frozen snow. One of the local exports was candied angelica, so he was probably the first British gardener to see *Angelica archangelica* (fig. 1) in the wild. He

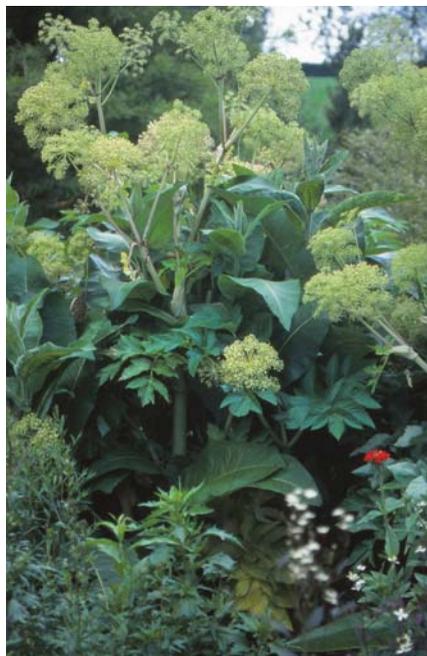


Fig. 1 *Angelica archangelica*

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Fig. 2 *Rosa acicularis*

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Fig. 3 *Orostachys spinosa*

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certainly saw *Rosa acicularis* (fig. 2), which was said to cover Rose Island and smell wondrous sweet. The island is now covered with military buildings, but the rose is still marvellously fragrant.

Of course Russia stretches from Europe to the Pacific, a vast country with a range of habitats, and some glorious plants – including *Scilla siberica*, the unusual *Orostachys spinosa* (fig. 3), the thick-leaved *Chiastophyllum oppositifolium*, now popular in a variegated form, and the pretty *Scutellaria baicalensis* – many now adorning our gardens.

Siberia is often thought to be a frozen wasteland, but from it come well-known plants such as *Cornus alba* – so-called because of its white berries, but grown now for the range of coloured stems so attractive in our winters – and elephant ears – though given its Siberian origins, perhaps a better name would be mammoth ears! Our garden *Bergenia* is usually a hybrid, but one of the species, *B. crassifolia* (fig. 4), is known in Russian as “Mongol tea”, its leaves dried and then infused in boiling water. A plant which has kept its original botanical name is *Papaver nudicaule*. First collected in Siberia along the Lena river, it was introduced to Britain about 1730. Up to the 1850s it was known simply as the naked-stemmed poppy, but is better known today as the Iceland Poppy. I have no evidence, but I suspect the change was made for supposedly patriotic reasons about the time of the Crimean War amid growing anti-Russian sentiment.

The Kamchatka peninsula, North of Japan, was botanically explored for the first time in the 1740s, when it provided many important plants to help Linnaeus develop his theories. An area with heavy winter snow and vigorous spring growth, it has given us many interesting garden plants including *Fritillaria camschatcensis*, *Trillium camschatcense*, and *Filipendula camtschatica* (fig. 5), which makes a real statement with its 2m-high

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Fig. 4 *Bergenia crassifolia*

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Fig. 5 *Filipendula camtschatica*

flowerheads. At present the horticultural trade is supplying these species from Japan and China, so it would be interesting to see if the more northerly plants are noticeably different.

As Russia and Siberia were explored botanically, similar work was done in lands to the south, especially the Crimea and the Caucasus. Linnaeus studied some of these plants, and many will know the name of Peter Simon Pallas, a German working for a Russian institution. But it was at the end of the eighteenth century that a great advance was made, first with an expedition led and financed by a friend of Sir Joseph Banks, Count Mussin-Pushkin, commemorated in the genus *Puschkinia*. In the 200 years since, a huge number of plants from this area has entered our gardens, far too many to name. My personal favourites are common *Brunnera macrophylla*, rarer *Aconitum pubiceps*, *Cephalarea gigantea*, *Geranium ruprechtii* (fig. 6) – named in honour of a botanist at St Petersburg Botanical Garden (SPBG) born in the Austrian Empire – and *G. ibericum* – confusingly using an ancient name for the Caucasus, not the Iberian peninsula. It's clear where *Scabiosa caucasica* originates.

In the early nineteenth century, while SPBG was in the doldrums, botanists based in Estonia, Moscow and Siberia continued the work. They opened up new areas such as the Altai Mountains and other areas of the Caucasus, where Ledebour collected *Geranium psilostemon* (fig. 7). The SPBG was later re-invigorated by another German, F.E.L. Fischer. His visit to Kew in 1824 resulted in the exchange of many plants between the two institutions. *Dianthus fischeri* (fig. 8) is a lovely memorial to him.



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Fig. 6 *Geranium ruprechtii*



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Fig. 7 *Geranium psilostemon*



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Fig. 8 *Dianthus fischeri*

Perhaps the greatest number of garden plants came from China, where doctors associated with the Russian Mission in Beijing made many collections, and Bunge, on a shorter visit, collected plants such as the herbaceous *Ceratostigma plumbaginoides*, *Clerodendrum bungei* (fig. 9) with its stinking leaves and fragrant flowers, the herbaceous *Clematis heracleifolia*, and the wet-ground plant *Lysimachia barystachys* (fig. 10).

Then, while Britain was fighting opium wars in southern China, Russia expanded its borders in the north, and the botanists took advantage. A major interest was the flora of the Amur river valley, which today forms much of the border between the two countries. This was the first area explored by Carl Johann Maximowicz, a major botanical figure of the nineteenth century. Amongst his vast collection is *Actinidia kolomikta* (fig. 11), a climber worthy of any garden. Many beautiful plants have Amur in their name, while others, such as *Prunus maackii* with its toffee-coloured bark, commemorate botanists. For over a century scientific botanists had been trying to find the true ginseng, and it was from the borders between China and Russia that a specimen, provided by Kirilov, then working in Beijing, was first described as *Panax ginseng*. A related species was also found by Kirilov in the Amur region – *Eleutherococcus senticosus*. Sometimes called Siberian ginseng, this has long been used as a tonic by Russian athletes and cosmonauts. Later Maximowicz was one of the first scientific botanists to visit Japan after its opening to the West. He collected many plants himself and also arranged for Tchonosky, a Japanese, to work with him and continue to send his discoveries to SPBG for many years afterwards. Many of their discoveries decorate our gardens, including, for example, the toad lily, *Tricyrtis latifolia* (fig. 12); the chestnut-leaved bog plant, *Rodgersia aesculifolia*; and the snakebark maple, *Acer capillipes* – although an acer from central China with attractive leaf colour, *A. maximowiczii*, was named in his honour.

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Fig. 9 *Clerodendrum bungei*

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Fig. 10 *Lysimachia barystachys*

Perhaps the most commonly grown ‘Russian’ plant in British gardens is the Siberian iris. *Iris sibirica* grows in the steppes of southern Russia and eastwards into parts of Siberia, but not in the frozen wastes of popular imagination. The only iris which grows there is *Iris setosa*, which is also found in North America. Probably the widest range of irises comes to us from southern Russia, the Caucasus, and especially Central Asia. This area was extensively botanised in the second half of the nineteenth century, and has given us the bearded *Iris albertii* (fig. 13), named by Eduard Regel of SPBG in honour of his son, who collected it. The largest group of irises from this area is the Junos. Bulbs with permanent roots, which always remind me of an octopus, they are impervious to cold but need protection from waterlogging when too cold to grow. In spring they will grow rapidly, flower, possibly set seed, then wither and die back for summer dormancy. Two of the earliest to flower are *I. maracandica* and *I. nicolai* (fig. 14), which has been described as ‘a ghost iris’ for obvious reasons. Most of the Junos came to us via Russia, while a group with names such as *I. warleyensis* and *I. willmottiana* came via collectors who worked semi-secretly in this area of the Russian Empire, smuggled out through the British consulate in Kashgar in western China – an unintended consequence of Kipling’s Great Game.

A good companion for Juno irises is the fritillary, and a reliable species from this area is *Fritillaria bucharica*. But probably the best-known flower which grows in abundance in this area is the tulip. In Britain the tulip is associated with the era of tulip mania in Holland, and probably Turkey. But Tradescant Senior was told of tulips in the South of Russia, the home of *Tulipa greigii*. From there across the Caspian and throughout Central Asia is the homeland of the genus, most described by Russians – *T. kaufmanniana* for example in honour of the Governor of Turkestan, while amongst others *T. praestans* and *T. tarda* (fig. 15), like some of the Junos, were named by



Fig. 11 *Actinidia kolomikta*

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Fig. 12 *Tricyrtis latifolia*

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western Europeans. But *Salvia sclarea* var. *turkestanica* should remind us that this region has much more to offer.

Probably the most famous Russian explorer of northern China is Nikolai Przhevalsky. Most gardeners (and horse lovers) will have come across his name, even if they've found it unpronounceable. On several long journeys he made large collections of dried specimens and seeds, including *Aconitum lycoctonum* subsp. *vulparia*, *Daphne tangutica* (fig. 16), *Ligularia stenocephala*, *Salvia przewalskii* and, for the first time, wild medicinal rhubarb, *Rheum palmatum* var. *tanguticum*. He was beginning yet another expedition towards Lhasa in Tibet when he died of fever on the shores of Lake Issyk Kul in Kyrgyzstan, where his memorial stands (fig. 17). The neighbouring town was named Przhevsk in his honour, but has now reverted to its original name of Karakol.

Plant hunters from many nations continued to search China, not least of them a husband and wife team from Russia, Alexandra and Grigori Potanin. While most collectors travelled widely, returning to marked areas if they wished to collect seed later, the Potanins tended to stay for the whole growing season, from flowering to seed-ripening, and organized several others to do the same. Several plants are named after them, including *Adenophora potaninii*.

A plant whose common name reveals its origins is the Californian Poppy. But anyone who has tried to get their tongue around its botanical name, *Eschscholzia californica*, might be excused some perplexity. It is, in fact, one of a large number of plants from the Americas which were first collected by Russians, or people working on behalf of Russia. They were the first Europeans to set foot in Alaska, in 1741, and the country remained part of the Russian Empire until sold to the USA in 1867. As part of the management of this overseas empire, Russia organized several round-the-world expeditions in the early

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Fig. 13 *Iris albertii*

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Fig. 14 *Iris nicolai*



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Fig. 15 *Tulipa tarda*



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Fig. 16 *Daphne tangutica*

years of the nineteenth century, and no less than for those of Cook before or Darwin after, scientific research was paramount. As a consequence, we have many garden plants from the Americas but with Russian associations. Eschscholts was a botanist on an expedition, and a fellow traveller, Chamisso, named the Californian poppy in his honour. A German, he made a sizeable collection and named the plants on his return to Berlin. One of them is a very garden-worthy fern, *Polystichum mitnitum*.

Probably the region most familiar to British gardeners is the Caucasus, with a growing trade in mainly bulbous plants from Central Asia in recent years. But there is a wealth of interesting plants in Russia, southern Siberia and the Pacific regions; it is to be hoped that the trade will soon begin to investigate this flora with much more vigour. 🌱



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Fig. 17 Przhhevsky memorial in Kyrgyzstan

Jeff Bryce has had a long-term interest in all things Russian, and has published a book on the history of Russian botany, *A Botanists' Paradise*, grant-aided by the RHS. He grows a fair few Russian plants in his damp and shady garden in the Swansea Valley.