

A plantsman in the 21st century

Tim Ingram

What a time to be a gardener. In those famous words of Dickens ‘It [is] the best of times, it [is] the worst of times’. The best of times because the variety and knowledge of plants has never been so great; the worst of times because the pressures placed on the environment, inevitable that they are, often take little account of the diversity and appeal of plants. For most people plants are simple commodities to provide colour and excitement, perfectly reasonable in itself, but relatively few I suspect study plants’ origins, relationships, and how they can be propagated and shared with others.

To be a plantsman or woman at all is a relatively recent phenomenon; it is the result of that sometimes unsettling combination of artistic and scientific temperaments – a fascination with the detail of things and also how they can act in concert. In a study of the natural world itself this would be called ‘ecology’, but the gardener uses ecological principles in the way the artist uses a brush and pigments, with the added sense of greenfingers. The plantsman’s garden revels in craft as much as it does in artistry.

For many of us, such ways of gardening recall figures like William Robinson, Reginald Farrer and Gertrude Jekyll. But in a sense they were just in the public eye, for a whole number of gardeners, many in poorer situations, had always made cottage gardens and enjoyed particular types of plants. Nearly a century earlier gardeners were not so very different. Reading *The Floricultural Cabinet and Florist’s Magazine* (fig. 1), conducted (a rather lovely term for ‘edited’) by Joseph Harrison, what comes across is the same interest and practice that we know today, though described in more courteous and circumspect language. My family is fortunate indeed to have the first eight volumes (published 1833–1840), which are beautifully illustrated with hand-coloured plates of many plants which still today grace only the gardens of plantsmen. The writing, though, is almost all about individual plants, rather than

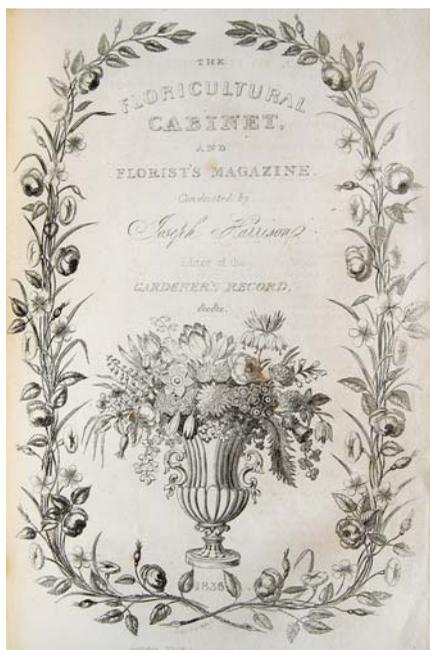


Fig. 1 *The Floricultural Cabinet* frontispiece

making gardens, and you can see why William Robinson's *The English Flower Garden* (1883) was a seminal book. Something of the same change may be occurring today, even if the gardening media rarely takes as its subjects the natural plant communities around the world.

None the less I love reading *The Floricultural Cabinet* because I do celebrate individual plants, as well as enjoying them in the wider context of the garden, as must most Hardy Planters. The indices show an astonishing range of plants being grown, both familiar and unfamiliar. For example there is guidance on how to grow *Erythrina cristagalli*, comment on the fascinating Mediterranean shrub *Ebenus cretica* (nothing so much like a cross between a tree lupin and clover!), and descriptions of the nowadays widely grown salvias, *S. patens*, *S. fulgens* and *S. leucantha*. Volume I has a very good, detailed article on cultivating *Cypripedium* species; recent successes in hybridising and raising them from seed have meant that they are now much more widely available. In Volume V there is advice on growing a collection of South African heathers, extraordinary plants rarely cultivated now.

The plates take as their subjects plants of all sorts, and in the later volumes they're often beautifully presented, carefully and sensitively coloured, and must have added greatly to what was a Plant Journal of relatively large circulation. The ease with which plants can be illustrated now doesn't detract from the charm of these images from 180 years ago. There are references to the shows of gardening societies around the country, and to prestigious publications like Curtis' *Botanical Magazine*, which would have been in the hands of far fewer gardeners. At the time there were many similar journals, including *The Botanical Register*, *The Botanical Cabinet*, *The British Flower Garden*, *The Botanic Garden*, *The Gardener's Magazine* and *Loddige's Botanical Cabinet*. As someone whose garden seems to relate to all of these, I feel a certain affinity with the age! The cultural detail is enlightening compared to today, where 'how things are done' can often be relegated to 'how things look'. On the whole the writing is serious, but every now and again comments are made in a lighter and more jokey vein, poking gentle fun at some of the more nonsensical ways that others grow plants – but I suppose they are only nonsensical after they have been tried and failed. The overall focus is on 'ordinary' people's love of growing plants and their desire to share this with others. The similarity with the specialist horticultural societies of today is obvious.



Fig. 2 *Camellia japonica* var. *campbelli*



Fig. 3 Curious *Tropaeolum pentaphyllum*, centre right, with *Lupinus mutabilis* var. *cruckshanksii*, *Thysanotus junceus*, *Nierembergia phoenicea* and *Chorizema spartioides*

the passion for growing plants was certainly the equal of today. At that time it coincided with and resulted from a burgeoning fascination and exploration of the world. Now times are different, but it is still a strongly valid argument that our individual gardens and the plants we grow in them are hugely important, both for ourselves and for our knowledge and understanding of the plant world. Plantsmen and women and specialist plant societies like the HPS must always play a great role in this, and in the distribution of plants, and in encouraging people to garden in more sensible ways. When one watches some of the more extravagant ‘gardening theatre’ at the RHS shows, it is good to come home to your own, more modest patch. 🍷

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