



SUE SHEPHARD

A memorial plaque in Devoran churchyard, Cornwall, where Thomas Lobb was buried (his brother, William, died in California).

Plant hunters *extraordinaire*

While plant collectors such as Ernest Wilson and David Douglas were lauded at the time - and remain famous to this day - the Cornish Lobb brothers, William and Thomas, have been overlooked by comparison, yet many of their introductions remain popular garden plants

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This year is the 150th and 120th anniversary of the deaths of plant-collecting brothers, William (1809–1864) and Thomas Lobb (1820–1894) respectively. They were the first of 23 plant collectors who searched the globe for desirable plants to boost the catalogues of Veitch's Nursery, one of the most significant commercial growers of the time, based in Devon and London. Whether new introductions or rarities in botanical collections at the time, all were collected in sufficient numbers for them to be propagated and sold to gardeners. Many of the Lobbs' introductions are still available, and are still widely grown today.

The brothers spent their early years in Egloshayle, north Cornwall, where their father worked at nearby Pencarrow. Thomas, who was working at Veitch's Nursery in Mount Radford, Exeter, suggested his brother William as their

first collector. James Veitch wanted someone who knew 'what to collect for a nurseryman, rather than one who only appraised plants with a botanist's ego'. Employing William proved an inspired decision on his part.

William Lobb

From 1840 to 1844, and 1845 to 1848, William Lobb collected in South America, sending back plants from Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador, Peru and beyond to Panama, and especially from Chile. From 1849 he worked in western North America, in Oregon and California, where he settled until his death on 3 May 1864.

William introduced a host of outstanding plants and is responsible for the widespread cultivation of two iconic conifers. *Araucaria araucana* (monkey puzzle) was introduced to the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew from >>



Chile by its collector Archibald Menzies, who travelled with Captain Vancouver on his 1791–95 circumnavigation of the globe. James Veitch seems to have been the first to spot the ornamental potential of *Araucaria araucana*, and he commissioned Lobb to collect seed on his first trip to Chile. The 3,000 seeds Lobb harvested helped ensure the rise of monkey puzzle trees to fashionable status symbols in Victorian urban gardens and country estates alike.

He also sent a large number of *Sequoiadendron giganteum* (giant redwood) seeds from Calaveras Grove during the Californian 'Gold Rush' that began in 1848. Botanist John Lindley named the genus *Wellingtonia* on Christmas Eve 1853 to commemorate the Duke of Wellington 'who stands as high above his contemporaries as the Californian tree above the surrounding forests'. However, the name had already been used and, after considerable wrangling, it was renamed *Sequoiadendron* for Sequoia, a native American Cherokee, who gave this indigenous people their alphabet.

Scan the British landscape today and early plantings often tower above surrounding trees. William also introduced two familiar shrubs from the Chiloé Archipelago in southern Chile. *Berberis darwinii*, robust with glossy, spiny leaves and golden-orange flowers, was discovered by Charles Darwin, but introduced by Lobb in 1849, and *Escallonia rubra* var. *macrantha*, a maritime hedging stalwart with glossy young shoots and rose-carmine spring flowers, which remains popular: 'As a subject for seaside planting, few shrubs are more charming or useful,' notes *Hortus Veitchii* (see box, opposite).

He also introduced *Tropaeolum speciosum*, with scarlet flowers and metallic blue fruits, often found meandering happily up yew hedges in gardens in moist climates. It inhabits the margins of *Nothofagus* forest. Other outstanding 'finds' included *Crinodendron hookerianum*, with elegant, cherry-coloured lanterns (initially recommended as a 'beautiful greenhouse shrub'); *Desfontainia spinosa*, boasting waxy, scarlet, tubular flowers with yellow mouths; white-flowered *Luma apiculata*, arrayed in cinnamon and cream peeling bark, with clouds of white flowers; and the waxy bells of *Lapageria rosea*.

However, all of these glories are (arguably) crowned by *Embothrium coccineum* (Chilean fire bush). Flowering in late May or June, its vivid orange-scarlet blooms are simply breathtaking against a blue sky. Needing a sheltered, sunny spot in moist, acidic soil to flourish, it flowered for the first time in Britain at Veitch's Nursery in May 1853: those who nurtured it must have been astonished. All these species confirm that William Lobb did indeed know exactly what to collect for his nurserymen employers.

Thomas Lobb

William's younger brother Thomas made four trips to southeast Asia between 1843 and 1860, visiting many areas, among them Singapore, Java, Sumatra, Burma, Borneo, the Philippines and India. He focused on orchids,

conservatory plants and tender rhododendrons for the conservatories of the wealthy. At the end of his career, Thomas had a leg amputated due to injuries sustained while collecting, and lived out his years in Devon, Cornwall.

He sent *Rhododendron jasminiflorum* with white flowers and a deep pink 'eye' from Malacca. This and his collection of an orange-flowered *Rhododendron javanicum* contributed to the Victorian craze for growing tender (*Vireya*) rhododendrons. Veitch's Nursery created some 30 hybrids from Thomas's collections. He also introduced *Medinilla magnifica* (rose grape), a tropical epiphyte from Manila in the Philippines with large, pale pink bracts; it first flowered in the UK in April 1850, and is still widely available as a (somewhat temperamental) house plant.

Another jewel, *Hoya bella* – now *Hoya lanceolata* subsp. *bella* – sent from Talung Kola Mountain in Burma (Myanmar) was enthusiastically described by writers as 'This first gem of the air' and 'The most lovely of all the Hoya, resembling an amethyst set in silver'. Thomas also beguiled gardeners with orchids, including 'blue orchid', *Vanda coerulea* from the Khasia Hills, Assam, northeast India, which flowered for the first time in Britain in December 1850. A plant was exhibited at a meeting of the Horticultural Society of London (now the RHS) in Regent Street, where it was received 'with marked favour'. He also collected white-flowered moth orchid *Phalaenopsis amabilis*, and a number of carnivorous *Nepenthes* (monkey cups) such as *N. albomarginata* from Borneo – previously unknown to science – and 'numerous ferns'. Anyone growing *Deutzia gracilis* may be surprised to know it, too, was a Thomas Lobb introduction, from its native Japan.

The Lobb brothers made a great contribution to gardening, with the number and diversity of choice plants they introduced, yet they are less well known than many other 19th-century plant collectors. As far as can be ascertained, images of neither brother have come down to us. Yet, in this, their year of significant anniversaries, is it not time their contribution to our gardens was fully recognised, beginning with their elevation to the pantheon of plant-hunting 'greats'? ●

FURTHER READING

A new book on the Lobb brothers is due to be published this month. ♦ *Blue Orchid and Big Tree: Plant Hunters William and Thomas Lobb and the Victorian Mania for the Exotic*, by Sue Shephard and Toby Musgrave, Redcliffe Press, June 2014, £19.50, ISBN 9781908326607.



Veitch's Nursery



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For more than 100 years, five generations of Veitches ran the largest and most influential nurseries in Europe. After John Veitch established the first nursery in Killerton, Devon, he and his son James bought land in Mount Radford, Exeter and built up the business. At the height of their success the dynasty – run as separate concerns – also owned the fashionable Royal Exotic Nursery on the King's Road in Chelsea (established by James Veitch junior, pictured), and other sites around London. They were renowned for employing their own plant collectors, including members of the family, Richard Pearce, and EH Wilson (who collected *Davidia involucrata* while in their employment). By the First World War the Veitch dynasty had introduced 1,281 plants. Among these were 498 greenhouse plants, 232 orchids and 253 deciduous trees, shrubs and climbers. Their publications include *Hortus Veitchii* (1906), a history and list of their most remarkable introductions, and *Veitch's Manual of the Coniferae* (1881). The family's extraordinary but complex history concluded with the death of Mildred Veitch in 1969, but their impact on the world of plants and gardens remains immense.