

James Atkins and his plants

The hybrid garden *Petunia* was first raised by James Atkins prior to 1834

RHS / Graham Hitchmish

E CHARLES NELSON discusses a 19th-century nurseryman who raised the modern garden petunia as well as several other plants still grown today

TODAY'S GARDEN PETUNIAS come in many colours and patterns and are planted in beds, borders, window-boxes and hanging baskets. They do not exist in the wild but are among the most highly 'developed' bedding plants, subject of numerous high-tech breeding programmes. What we cultivate today arose from a hybrid which had its earliest manifestation in a Northampton nursery during the mid-1830s. The man who raised it was a Quaker plantsman called James Atkins.

Atkins's interests

Atkins was 82 years old when he died on 2 April 1884 at his home in Painswick, Gloucestershire. He was not a Painswick man by birth; his origins were in Northamptonshire. By 1830 he was established as a nurseryman and seedsman in Northampton and often exhibited prize-worthy plants at the Northamptonshire United Horticultural Society's shows. At the show on 29 July 1831, Atkins won a first prize for his own hybrid slipperwort, *Calceolaria x atkinsiana*. He was 'the most

successful competitor' in 1834, and his prize-winning plants – hyacinths, pinks, roses, cacti, camellias, Australian wattles and even double-blossomed gorse – indicate a well stocked nursery with a diverse collection.

There are several indications of Atkins's interest in more unusual, tender plants. In the autumn of 1839, at the Caledonian Horticultural Society's garden in Edinburgh, *Gardoaquia multiflora* bloomed. This 'very ornamental' but frost-tender shrub from Chile had come from Atkins the previous June; it was promptly illustrated for *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*. He had a heated glasshouse on his nursery and grew tropical orchids. Lieutenant-Colonel William George Augustus Feilding purchased an unnamed orchid from Atkins; when it



The plant that most gardeners would associate with James Atkins is *Galanthus* 'Atkinsii'

RHS / Mike Sleigh

bloomed in 1847 it was sent to John Lindley who named it *Coryanthes feildingii*.

Atkins's nursery was at Priors Cottage on Kingsthorpe Road, Northampton. A General Lunatic Asylum for Northamptonshire was opened close by in August 1838. Its chimneys were very smoky and the pigsties stank. Atkins complained frequently about these nuisances and successfully sued the Asylum's directors. In 1849, he must have had enough and so offered the nursery to the Asylum. He was paid £3,625 for the land with an extra £7 10s 0d for 'various shrubs which could not be moved.' Atkins then also decided to quit Northampton and move to Painswick in Gloucestershire. From the early 1850s he is usually referred to as 'of Painswick'.

Before Atkins left Northampton he sought places for those plants which he would not be able to cultivate. Professor Charles Daubeny (1853) acknowledged that one wing of the glasshouses in Oxford University Botanic Garden was 'chiefly devoted to tropical Ferns, of which we possess a good collection, contributed in great measure by James Atkins, Esq.'

Plants named after James Atkins

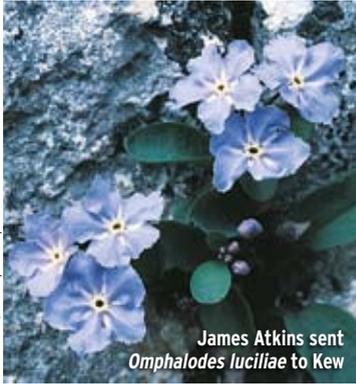
Atkins evidently had good contacts with botanist Robert Sweet, because Sweet published accounts of two hybrids raised by him. The first was *Pelargonium* \times *atkinsianum*, 'a pretty little small-leaved citron-scented plant, with pale blush flowers, with a brilliant dark purple patch in the centre' (Sweet 1830) which had been raised from seed. The publication of the hand-coloured illustration *P. x atkinsianum* in Sweet's monograph is the earliest indication of Atkins's work as a hybridizer.

The second Atkins plant described by Sweet (1832) was a slipperwort that first featured in a list of prize-winning plants for July 1831. *Calceolaria* \times *atkinsiana* was a cross between the 'dull purplish-violet' *C. arachnoidea* and *C. corymbosa* which has golden yellow flowers. Atkins's hybrid had red and yellow flowers, the pouch having a golden yellow rim and red centre. It was a perennial, propagated by division, capable of surviving outdoors through the winter.

Atkins was well regarded for his collection of *Cyclamen* and skill in cultivating them, yet there is

considerable uncertainty about *Cyclamen* \times *atkinsii*. It was illustrated in *The Garden Companion, and Florists' Guide* during 1852 alongside another cyclamen named *C. 'ibericum'* (*C. coum*). Atkins's cyclamen had large white flowers with a deep purple blotch close to the base of each markedly pointed petal, while the heart-shaped leaves had an irregular pale silvery-green band. He had supplied the specimen and a lengthy explanation of its origin. Having attempted to cross-pollinate certain *Cyclamen* species including *C. coum* and *C. persicum*, 'I at length succeeded in raising the hybrid now figured, from seeds produced by a variety of *C. coum*, impregnated with *C. persicum*' (Moore 1852). However, Grey-Wilson (1988) commented that *C. x atkinsii* 'can be discounted as being wholly improbable. The cross, if it was ever made, has never been repeated.' Atkins's hybrid was said to be 'exactly intermediate between its parents as to size and form' (Moore 1852). The Latin name has persisted and has been applied indiscriminately. Cyclamens labelled 'Atkinsii' are still being cultivated and sold but according to Grey-Wilson they are merely fine, large-flowered selections of *C. coum*.

Another plant that perpetuates Atkins's name is *Galanthus* 'Atkinsii': 'second to none in size, form, quality, and freedom in growth.' Atkins obtained it 'somewhere in the kingdom of Naples', and it was on sale as early as 1875. EA Bowles (1914) wrote a glowing description of this 'loveliest of all Snowdrops': 'The outer segments are wonderfully long and very perfect in shape, making the flower resemble a pear-shaped pearl ...' However, he also added a significant rider: 'Very near to it in early flowering and stature, but falling short in symmetry, is a form that I believe should be known ... ➤



Jim Archibald, courtesy of Jenny Archibald

James Atkins sent *Omphalodes luciliae* to Kew

[as] var. *Atkinsii* of Backhouse. It is a fine thing, but very seldom produces a perfectly symmetrical flower, for either one of the inner segments is as long as the outer ones, or there are four outer segments, or yet again a petaloid bract may appear just below the ovary but not quite so purely white as the flower proper, and all these vagaries give a clump rather an untidy appearance when looked at closely.' This less perfect cultivar is now called 'James Backhouse'.

Other plants named after James Atkins

A few other plants have been dubbed '*atkinsii*' or '*atkinsianum*' and, although their exact histories have not been discovered, they are quite likely to have links to James Atkins.

Delphinium '*Atkinsii*', a double, bright blue cultivar, can be traced back into the early 1850s but does not seem to have survived. *Dianthus* '*Atkinsii*', 'crimson, 1 foot', was noted in *The Gardeners' Chronicle* in 1875 and in David Thomson's *Handy Book of the Flower-garden* (1893). A red-flowered *Helleborus* named 'James Atkins' was grown in the late nineteenth century. *Yucca atkinsii*, described in 1881 by JG Baker as low-growing with leaves that became purple or were purplish, was first mentioned in 1874 and persisted into the 20th century.

James Atkins of Painswick

As noted, soon after selling his nursery to the asylum, Atkins moved to Painswick. Perhaps the most interesting reference to him from the 1850s is in Wills (1856) who acknowledged Atkins's help in naming plants, and recorded that they had travelled in the Alps together for six weeks during 1852. Thus, we get a picture of Atkins as a plantsman wandering in the Alps, and an intriguing part of his travels is the 'new but very simple form of collecting-box' which he designed specially for collecting plants in Switzerland. The device was a shallow box 'made in the usual way', but at its upper corners there were small blocks of wood and the lid rested on these, 'allowing plenty of air to circulate amongst the contents.' An example of Atkins's box, containing some Perthshire plants, was shown to members of the Royal Horticultural Society on 3 July 1872 by George Fergusson Wilson.

One Alpine species associated with Atkins is *Myosotis dissitiflora* which he found near Vogelberg and introduced into cultivation. He is also linked with *Omphalodes luciliae*; a specimen he gave to the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, was illustrated in *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* (tab. 6047, 1873).

James Atkins lived quietly in Painswick for more than three decades. He died there and was buried in the local graveyard. After 1850, he was not described as a 'nurserymen' and, except for planting some trees and shrubs in Luton Cemetery, Bedfordshire, he seems to have given up making his living from horticulture.

James Atkins's role in the breeding of the garden petunia

Very little is known about Atkins's prototype of the garden petunia

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which Sweet (1834) named *Nierembergia atkinsiana*: 'We are indebted to Mr. Atkins, ... for specimens of this very showy hybrid, raised by him between *Nierembergia nyctaginiflora* and *phoenicea*. ... The plant should prove a great ornament in the flower border, as it blossoms most abundantly The flowers, especially in the evening, diffuse an agreeable fragrance, resembling that of the clove pink.' *Nierembergia nyctaginiflora* is now placed in *Petunia*, and the plant Atkins knew as *N. phoenicea* is today called *Petunia axillaris*. These two species are accepted as the original parents of the modern garden petunia which is properly called *P. x atkinsiana*.

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