

RHS Libraries



History of plants:
finding out about the garden plants we grow today



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History of plants

Books and Journals

Plant nomenclature

The aim of the botanical naming system is to provide each different plant with a single, unique, universal name. This bi-nomial system was first promulgated by Linnaeus, in *Species Plantarum* (1753). Before then, names consisted of several words describing the plant (polynomials), meaning that the same plant could be described in many ways.

How to track down the current name of a species

The annual **RHS Plant Finder** aims to keep abreast of all changes in nomenclature. Recently superseded names cross-reference to current ones. If you don't find the species in *RHS Plant Finder*, look in Willis'

Dictionary of the Flowering Plants and Ferns (8th ed 1973). This will give you a pretty complete list of generic names proposed from the time of Linnaeus until its publication. To find the species name, you will need online resources: International Plant Names Index and The Plant List described below under electronic resources.

How to deal with pre-Linnaean polynomials

There is no direct step from a pre-Linnaean polynomial to a modern name. Richter's **Codex Botanicus Linnaeanus** (1840) attempts systematically to cross reference polynomials with their equivalent in Linnaeus' **Species Plantarum**. You will then need to refer to Charlie Jarvis's **Order out of Chaos** (2007), which attempts to provide current equivalents for all the names in *Species Plantarum*.

Plant descriptions

Curtis's Botanical Magazine, (1787 to present) is a good source for descriptions and illustrations. In 1956 a cumulative index including a revision of the names of plants illustrated was issued, covering years 1787-1947.

Horticultural magazines of the day included descriptions of new plants discovered and hybridised during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Magazines of specialist plant societies are also valuable.

For descriptions of cultivars, nursery catalogues, plant society journals or **The Plantsman** are useful sources. Registration of cultivar names did not begin until 1955, and a list of International Cultivar Registration Authorities is online at www.ishs.org/. The registers list cultivars generally available at the time. Cumulated checklists were first produced by the RHS during the 1980s, and have grown over the years. Registers for some genera can be found online via www.ishs.org/sci/taxlist/taxlist.htm.

Tracking down dates of introduction

There is no single reliable source to check for introduction dates. **Aiton's Hortus Kewensis** 1810-13 (5 vols) was the first systematic attempt to record introduction dates. Loudon and Sweet, in the 1830s, used Aiton's dates in their respective versions of **Hortus Britannicus**, though their reporting of more recent dates was based on press notices etc and is probably pretty accurate. There is a lack of reliable information for earlier generations. Many introduction dates for the 17th and 18th centuries are based on documented expeditions and receipts of plants at important gardens; but plants also crept in unnoticed through unrecorded channels, and first turn up in nursery lists. (For a list of names of species that first appear in seedlists, see <http://seedlists.naturalis.nl/>).

The **RHS Dictionary of Gardening** (1950s edition) gave introduction dates, but these proved inaccurate or ambiguous in many cases and they are not included in the **New RHS Dictionary** (1999); but they can still be useful as an initial guide.

For cultivars, **nursery catalogues** (collections at London and Wisley) are a major source of introduction dates, and apart from these, the only guide is monographs on particular genera. Plants also disappear from cultivation. A list of cultivars under

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threat has been created by Plant Heritage, see <http://www.nccpg.com/>.

How to trace RHS plant awards, etc.

Since 1858 the RHS has been awarding First-Class Certificates and Awards of Merit to plants. These are listed in the cumulative indexes (up to 1985) to the **RHS Journal**. Thereafter check annual **Proceedings of the RHS** for awards. For some periods in the 19th century, you will need to use the **Gardeners' Chronicle** instead. Look in the index under Societies / Royal Horticultural.

Award winners of the Award of Garden Merit, introduced 1922, are recorded in **Some Good Garden Plants** (editions from 1938 to 1962), supplemented for a while by **New Plants of the Year** in 1947, 1948 and 1949. In 1992, the list was thoroughly revised, and no earlier AGM plants are now accepted as valid. AGM lists have been published regularly since.

How to track down illustrations of a plant

The **Index Londinensis** is a list of plant illustrations from the time of Linnaeus to the early 20th century. Arranged alphabetically by genus and then by species, the publications in which illustrations are found are listed chronologically. Colour plates are asterisked; but until the 19th century most colouring was done after purchase, so the asterisk is not a sure guide.

The **Index Londinensis** did not attempt to be an authority on nomenclature, and frequently cites the name shown on the plate or its accompanying text, without attempting to update it. Cultivars are not (knowingly) included, but a number of 19th century first-generation hybrids are. The RHS libraries have, between them, something like ¾ of the works cited in the Index.

For more recent illustrations, there is no single source you can consult, and no resource for cultivars, except citations in historically-minded monographs.

Archives

A wide variety of cultivated plants are represented in both the official archive of the RHS and in collected archives relating to the history of horticulture. Records of **RHS plant committees, scientific committee, trials and shows** are a key source within the RHS archive, and archives of horticulturists such as **E.A. Bowles** and **Roy Lancaster** include correspondence with botanists, nurserymen and plant breeders. The Library's collections include papers reflecting the use of plants by garden designers such as **Gertrude Jekyll** and **Percy Cane**, as well as by amateur gardeners developing their own gardens. The papers of 19th to 21st century plant hunters provide a record of specimens and seeds collected around the world.

Collections are in the process of being catalogued, with searchable catalogues available on-line via the Archives Hub <https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/>. Catalogues specify the site at which the archive is held and conditions of access. Please make an appointment and request archive material in advance as some collections are held in offsite storage.

Art and Images

Appointments with our curators will be needed to view original works, but digital images can be viewed in the Libraries research rooms. Please ask staff to log you on to the RHS image database.

The botanical art collection consists of plant portraits of specific, individual plants. These range from the 1630s to the present day and cover an extensive geographical range. Subjects include native plants, cultivated varieties, ornamental and edible plants. Recent acquisitions highlight some endangered plants, as well as unusual varieties and invasive plants no longer welcome in British gardens.

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Artworks are catalogued to genus level, detailing the species and variety where possible. The drawing's title is always that given by the artist, including any mis-attributions and mis-spellings. Explanation is given if the current botanical name differs to that given as the title. Where titles appear in square brackets eg. [Papaver] for an unidentified drawing of a poppy, the name has been assigned by the curator. Please be aware that plant names do sometimes change and whilst the catalogue is constantly being added to, some names may not yet be up to date.

Search the library catalogue to find plant illustrations by using Advanced Search and selecting the *Drawings* format. Some illustrations can be viewed at www.rhsimages.co.uk.

The RHS image database contains digitised versions of original botanical art works, alongside images from early published books. In many cases the early printed works feature the only example of a particular variety that can still be seen today.

Electronic resources

Plant nomenclature

RHS Plantfinder at www.rhs.org.uk/plants.
International Plant Names Index www.ipni.org
and The Plant List www.theplantlist.org.

Synonyms are also listed on www.theplantlist.org and www.catalogueoflife.org. The Catalogue of Life also maintains an annual checklist, with an archive of downloadable datafiles back to 2000. These provide a "dated, verifiable reference for the usage of names".

A list of International Cultivar Registration Authorities is online at www.ishs.org/ and includes online registers for some genera.

Plant Names: a guide for horticulturists, nurserymen, gardeners and students is a short, simple guide to the correct use of plant names, downloadable from www.hortax.org.uk – under the *Plant Names in Print* tab.

Descriptions and illustrations of plants Biodiversity Heritage Library

www.biodiversitylibrary.org. Digitised copies of books, journals and papers from a consortium of natural history libraries. Use Advanced Search under the *Scientific Name* tab to find plant descriptions and illustrations. Includes **Hortus Kewensis**, **Gardener's Chronicle** and many other 19th century periodicals. There is no separate search within a volume, except by viewing the digitized index pages to locate the relevant page (eg. when viewing Hortus Kewensis via BHL)

Curtis' Botanical Magazine

Volumes 1807-1920 (no.505-8873). For full text from 1997 to present see JSTOR. rs.

JSTOR (Walk-in Access Resource)

Full text journal articles from over 500 titles from JSTOR's Ecology and Botany, and Arts and Sciences III collections.

Walk-in access resources are digital resources subscribed to by the Library. Library visitors can use them free of charge – please ask library staff to log you on.

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