

Great Britain for example had only one or two species of apple, beech, birch, maple, oak and pine, and no pears, spruce, chestnuts, horse-chestnuts, sycamores or walnuts—all of which are commonly thought of as natives having been introduced centuries ago.



Queen Hatshepsut (1479-1457BCE) Statue in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

The first recorded plant hunt was for Queen Hatshepsut of Egypt who in 1495 BC sent a party to collect the common myrrh from Somalia, a thorny almost leafless plant that will never be sought after as a garden beauty.

In those days probably the greater risk for the plant hunter was not bringing the plant home. No doubt there were other introductions during those ancient times but it was during the empires of Greece and Rome that an increasing number of plants were spread around their colonies to places where they hadn't previously been. Following the conquest of the Persian Empire by Alexander the Great, a number of trees from the East were introduced including the walnut, mulberry and peach. The interest then was predominantly productive plants. They also began the systematic study of plants. The Romans, on the other hand, did not engage in plant hunting to any extent but they did scatter a number of known plants around their colonies, both for produce and for beauty in their beloved flower gardens.

Little changed after them until the Renaissance when the classical systems in a number of sciences were again brought to light including the Greek systematic study of plants. Again it was predominantly functional plants that were of interest, the "medicinals" and the "herbals" but soon scientific studies of other plants were undertaken. By the middle of the 16th century and to further these studies, organised collections were planted in centres of learning

such as the universities. The world's first botanic gardens were begun in Pisa and Padua in 1544 and 1545. Soon others were established such as gardens commenced in Montpellier, France, by Pierre de Belleval and at Leiden, Holland, by Carolus Clusius, both in 1593.



Carolus Clusius (1526-1609)

It wasn't long before plants from afar were being sought; the merchants of Venice collected for the Orto Botanico di Padova, whilst Belleval had plants collected from the surrounding mountains, the Cevennes, the Alps and the Pyrenees. Clusius at Leiden urged the Dutch East India Company to send back specimens and planted tulips originating from Turkey, that he had previously grown in Vienna. He is credited with introducing them to Holland, leading on to Tulip Mania and the commercial bulb industry. A trickle of specimens collected from the ancient world began to appear in Western Europe that included the horse-chestnut (introduced to Europe in 1600) and the cedar of Lebanon soon after. No doubt the collectors at those times took great risks and sometimes perished. Their stories have been obscured by history.

For one father and son however the tales of their risks and privations have been recorded, albeit with debate on some of the details. For those interested the Tradescants have been the subject of novels by Philippa Gregory. The following is a brief summary of their adventures.

John Tradescant the elder was working as a gardener for Robert Cecil, 1st Earl of Salisbury at Hatfield House when first sent in 1610 to the Low Countries to collect fruit trees, a journey which seemed to encourage his enthusiasm for collecting all and sundry. Following the death of his initial employer, he moved to St Augustine's Palace, Canterbury, where he soon brought fame to the garden and so got to know many famous men of the day. Through them he invested in an

expedition to the new colony of Virginia to obtain new plants such as *Rhus typhina* and the spiderwort, *Tradescantia virginiana*.



John Tradescant the elder (1570-1638)

His next great adventure was in 1618 when he was a member of a trade mission to Russia as its naturalist. The trade mission itself was a spectacular and costly failure, and though John the elder's interest in 'local weeds' amused and mystified the Russians, he returned to England with a valuable load of plants, many other specimens and put together the first known list of Russian plants. His next high adventure was in 1620 when he joined as a 'gentleman adventurer' an expedition against the Algerian corsairs. Whilst little harm came to the Barbary pirates, John the elder made several risky trips ashore where he observed acres of a rare gladiolus and brought back a number of specimens including an apricot that was soon propagated in every nobleman's garden. In 1630 he became royal gardener and remained at Lambeth until his death.



John Tradescant the younger (1608-1662)

By then, John the younger had already gone to collect specimens, this time from the new world.

He returned to England to succeed his father as gardener to Charles I. After the death of the King in 1642, he is thought to have made two further trips to Virginia, ultimately spending many years there in harsh conditions collecting plants and other artefacts. His final years were spent in their 'Ark' at Lambeth cultivating the wide range of new acquisitions and cataloguing their collection. That collection was later left to Oxford University by Elias Ashmole and has become the Ashmolean Museum (the world's premier university museum) though alas the garden was neglected and its trees soon disappeared.

Between them, the Tradescants introduced a number of important plants to England. Amongst those they introduced or grew first were the larch, Robinia, swamp cypress, the tulip tree, phlox, Michaelmas daisies, a collection of cistus, *Gladiolus byzantinus*, white lupins, cos lettuce, scarlet runner beans. More importantly they helped establish the role of the plant hunter, stimulating the interest in creating plant collections and introducing unusual species to our gardens.

Simon Grant 2013

References and Further Reading:

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