

## Plant-mania

We all know gardeners who will go to great lengths to acquire a plant, but would they go on a perilous ocean voyage for years on end? The British have a long history of plant collecting. Long voyages were undertaken in the attempt to find rare and wonderful, new and useful plants. Not just herbs for enhancing food or as medicine but plants that could be teaching tools in the constant drive to understand the science of botany.

The names of these botanizing explorers are often caught in the names of their discoveries. For example that house-eating Lady Banks rose, *Rosa banksiae*. Sir Joseph Banks spent years on a famous voyage with Captain James Cook to the South Seas beginning in 1768 for a three year trip.

Banks paid for a staff of nine to facilitate his study of plants and wildlife. After sailing around New Zealand and the coast of Australia, the HMS Endeavour smashed into the Great Barrier Reef: they managed to sail the ship to Batavia in the Dutch East Indies for repairs. The trip was not all seeds and flowers: 53 members of the crew, including three of Banks' artists, died from the fevers endemic to the area and age.

Captain Cook was chosen for this voyage of discovery because of his skill in surveying the coast of Newfoundland during the Canadian operations of the Seven Year War. It was also Captain Cook's crews who benefited from having sauerkraut aboard as protection against scurvy.

The deaths of the artists greatly delayed the publication of Banks "Florilegium". Although 280 of the 900 watercolors were finished, the plates lay in specially designed boxes in the British Museum for over 200 years. In 1988 a limited edition was published for 50,000 pounds per set. Each set contained 723 prints and they were all sold long before the nine years it took to complete the work. The purchasers were mostly universities and botanic gardens, many in the United States.

The success of Cook's voyage, despite the loss of life, resulted in Banks' friendship with George III who shared his keen interest in science. Banks became unofficial director of the king's botanic gardens at Kew. Plants that were sent worldwide were not just of scientific interest but were an attempt often to allay hunger and establish a viable trade.

Later botanists had greater success in preserving specimens because of the Wardian cases invented by Nathaniel Ward in 1831. They were simply portable miniature greenhouses. Once the seeds or a plant was sealed inside the glass case it would be watered as the sunlight pulled water vapor out of the soil and recycled it. It was an important development for those lengthy sea voyages.

Study of plants was at the forefront from early in the 17<sup>th</sup> century's scientific revolution. One of the first efforts to study the flora of the British Isles was the 1660 "Cambridge Catalog of Plants" and 1660 was also the year the Royal Society was founded in London. These early scientists, in their far ranging studies of the terrains that housed plants were led to questions about fossils and the truth about the age of the earth itself. In those tempestuous political times such deviation from accepted beliefs and prejudices was not well received. Swedish botanist, Linnaeus (1707-1778) gave later botanists a structure for naming plants in his system of classes, orders, etc. It was used and adapted and changed even after the classification by differences in reproductive parts was abandoned.

Ease of present day transportation and our 2013, 20/20 hindsight makes it hard for us to appreciate the dedication, determination, and valor of these early plantsmen, who often died as a

result of their excursions into the wild. The wealth of beautiful flora we enjoy today rests in great part on their long ago efforts.

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