

AN ABUNDANCE
of FLOWERS



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Introduction

ALL OF US, gardeners and nongardeners alike, are extraordinarily spoiled in being able to satisfy almost any floral whim with a huge abundance of choices. Did you ever wonder about the amazing variety of potted and cut flowers found even in the local supermarket, why you have roses which start to bloom in the early spring and continue late into the year, or why there are chrysanthemums in almost every color of the rainbow, including green? How about that prosaic garden center or “big box store” down the street and its vast inventory? Did you ever ask yourself how they could offer such varied flowers and who might have created them?

It is hard to imagine a time when florists’ carnations were new and exotic, but that was the case toward the end of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, when the humble pink became a great star. Begonias are another example. The new flowers came in waves and created great excitement. Many began as rich men’s playthings, like orchids, but rapidly came down in price and spread to the general population.

There is hardly a flower or shrub in general use that has not been cross-bred and hybridized since its original discovery. In *Visions of Loveliness: Great Flower Breeders of the Past*, I touched on the fascinating stories behind eighteen well-known flowering plants, but no work of that sort is ever complete: One simply draws a mental line at a particular point and stops. As soon as the manuscript has been sent to the publisher, new material appears, and the task stretches out asymptotically.

With that in mind, I decided to pick up where I had stopped and cover another series of handsome plants with equally fascinating stories. In this book, I look into several more herbaceous flowers and one vine.

In a few instances, figures familiar from the first book make another appearance. Victor Lemoine (1823–1911) is one of them. Lemoine was the son and grandson of well-established estate gardeners in Alsace-Lorraine. The family worked for a wealthy nobleman. It was a sign of their prosperity and social position that Victor Lemoine's parents could afford to send him to a good school and allow him to stay there until he was seventeen. Usually, gardeners' children were lucky to go to school at all. It was clear Victor Lemoine knew exactly what he wanted to do, because he apprenticed himself to three of the most influential horticulturists of his day. Within a year of opening his own nursery in 1844 in Nancy, a rapidly growing industrial city in eastern France, he issued the first of his intentional hybrids, a new purslane. Shortly after that, more of his hybrids drew attention and he was the subject of an article in a French horticultural journal.

During his self-directed apprenticeship, Lemoine spent about a year in Ghent with Louis Van Houtte, a now-legendary figure who expanded the radical new business of breeding flowers. Van Houtte had a very powerful vision of what could be done and evidently found backers to support it. Ultimately Van Houtte covered acres of land in Ghent with greenhouses. During that epoch, Belgium led Europe in the flower business, equal at least to the industry in the Netherlands. Lemoine looked and learned.

In this volume, we encounter Lemoine introducing a dizzying number of penstemons, almost 500 cultivars. He did not do so badly with gladioli either, nor with pelargoniums, begonias, peonies, deutzias, and weigelas, yet even he was overtaken by another one of those industrious Scots whose energy and drive are legendary. In the modest provincial town of Hawick, Scotland, John Forbes developed 550 cultivars of penstemon. A few of his introduc-

tions are still available. It turns out that Forbes corresponded with Lemoine and used plants from Nancy as the basis of some of his crosses.

With more information resulting from persistent research, a pattern is recognizable. For every group of modest horticulturists who did fine work and left a small legacy, there were indeed formidable figures who once were feted and admired but whose names have languished unknown in recent years. It may seem pettifogging and unnecessary to bring back so many minor breeders, but the reward lies in restoring the reputations of almost larger-than-life horticulturists.

In nearly every chapter, the reader will find a heartening story of a flower breeder who built a vast business, supplying the rest of the United States with seeds and bulbs and even sending his wares abroad. As long as they lived, the businesses flourished, but unless they had children who took over, or devoted partners who continued after they died, everything evaporated. If ever the tag "*Sic transit gloria mundi*" applied, it is to the flower breeding business. These people are merely dusty echoes now.

Luther Burbank's reputation is secure because of the scale of his achievements and the importance of his work. Burbank bred the formidable potato that changed the way this crop was grown and was a huge benefit to humanity. He also introduced many new types of fruit as well as some flowers such as the Shasta daisy, still a valuable ornamental plant. Because of these accomplishments, Burbank has become a legend.

Few can compete with that. Great flower breeders like Henry Harris Groff and his gladioli and Wilhelm Pfitzer with gladioli, penstemons, and several other flowers, for example, had triumphant achievements in their lifetimes. Pfitzer and his descendants won so many medals and cups that a numismatist wrote an entire book about them. But no one remembers Pfitzer or Groff today apart from relatives.

Such accomplishments have been absorbed into the sum total of horticultural knowledge as the world has moved on. The individual breeders have been forgotten. Many were extremely prosperous and well-known in their time, but now they have to be sought in archives. It is intensely gratifying to be able to restore their lives and reputations.