

# Garden seeds in England before the late eighteenth century – II, The Trade in Seeds to 1760

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## Abstract

Steady expansion in the garden seed trade throughout the period was caused by a similar increase in commercial and private gardening. In the sixteenth century, seed retailing failed to provide both the quantity and quality of garden seeds demanded. Specialist seedshops gradually developed in London in the seventeenth century and two shops are examined in some detail. Seed selling between the late seventeenth century and 1760 is discussed against a background of the rapid development of consumer goods and services at the time. The role of fashion and taste in shaping demand for garden seeds and their advertisement via the press, catalogues, books, pamphlets, and flysheets is described. The conclusion is drawn that garden seed retailing had a significant influence on the development of gardening and agriculture at this time.

THE GROWTH and development of the garden seed trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the result of a continuous expansion in demand for seeds. Both commercial and private gardening was on the increase throughout the period. Writers in the middle of the seventeenth century, such as Samuel Hartlib, looked back on burgeoning commercial gardening in southern England since 1600; John Worlidge in the 1670s thought both commercial and private gardening had much increased in recent years, whilst Richard Bradley estimated that market gardens around London had expanded elevenfold to 110,000 acres between the 1660s and 1723.<sup>1</sup>

The physical expansion of gardening was accompanied, especially in the eighteenth century, by a sharp rise in the number of plants cultivated. Most new garden plants came from abroad, and although many may have initially been introduced by planthunters, botanists, and enthusiastic amateurs, numerous gardeners first came across them in the catalogues of seedsmen and nurserymen. Philip Miller, in the

introduction to the fourteenth edition of his *Gardeners Kalendar* in 1765 (the first was published in 1731) explained that 'In each of the editions subsequent to the first, there have been such alterations and additions made, as were necessary to include such new plants as have been annually introduced into the English Gardens.'<sup>2</sup>

Frequent complaints, especially before the eighteenth century, of seed shortages and lack of opportunities to buy garden seeds indicate that seed sellers did not for many years cope with expanding demand: Richard Gardiner in 1599 thought 'the dearth of Seedes for Gardens is a great hindrance to the profit of Gardens, and a great losse to the common wealth'. From the end of the seventeenth century however, the trade went through a period of development as a growing number of seedsmen sold their wares by more sophisticated methods. The London seed shops formed a small part of the 'retailing revolution' of the eighteenth century about which much has recently been written. This paper will first examine the seed trade before the last quarter

<sup>1</sup> Richard Bradley, *A General Treatise of Husbandry and Gardening*, 1726, I, p. 273; John Worlidge, *Systema Horticulturae*, 1677, p. 175.

<sup>2</sup> John Harvey, *Early Nurserymen*, 1974, p. 128; Philip Miller, *The Gardeners Kalendar*, 1765, p. vi.

of the seventeenth century and then trace the later development of the trade against the background of the general changes taking place in retailing.<sup>3</sup>

## I

The previous article put forward evidence that a rudimentary trade in some garden seeds operated before 1500. In the fifteenth century, provincial mercers imported seeds, such as the Salisbury merchant who brought in onion seed through the port of Southampton in 1451. Grocers and general shopkeepers in London and the provinces kept some garden seeds in stock, and seeds were probably to be found in the packs of pedlars who wandered the countryside and congregated, to the dismay of the London authorities, at Cheapside and Cornhill.<sup>4</sup>

At the end of the sixteenth century these pedlars had a reputation for selling seeds of questionable quality. Sir Hugh Plat wrote in 1596 of a wasted year growing asparagus because he was

abused in the seeds, which is an ordinary practice these days, with all such as follow that way, either to deliver the seeds which they sell mingled with such as are old and withered, or else without any mingling at all to sell such as are stark naught. I would there were some fit punishment devised for these petit cosenors, by whose means many poor men in England do oftentimes lose, not onely the charge of their seed, but the whole use & benefit of their ground, after they have bestowed the best part of their wealth upon it. Cheapside is full of these lying and forswearing Huswives.<sup>5</sup>

Three years later Richard Gardiner was even more outraged in his condemnation of 'those which bee comon sellers of Garden seedes. I cannot omitte nor spare my minde,

concerning the great and abhominable falsehoode of those sortes of people which sell Garden seedes: consider thus much, admit that all those which be decieved in thys land yearly in buying of olde and dead seedes for their gardens, had made their accompts of their losses: first their money paide for false and counterfeit seedes, their great losses in manuring and trimming their Gardens, and the rents paide for Gardens throughout this land; then consider how many thousand poundes are robbed yeerely from the common wealth by those Catterpillers'. Gardiner's reliance on pedlars in provincial Shrewsbury is understandable, but that Plat should buy from them in London suggests that reputable merchants selling seeds in the capital were few and street sellers were the usual retailers. The London merchants who did sell seeds were by no means seed specialists: garden seeds (mostly imported) were just a small part of their businesses.<sup>6</sup>

No doubt many garden seeds were sold locally by market gardeners with surplus stocks, although few would have been as commercially minded as Richard Gardiner who included a price list in his 1599 pamphlet on vegetable and seed growing, offering vegetable seeds retail and also wholesale – 'if any person desire to buy any store of principall carret seedes . . . to sell for reason to others, to benefit the commonwealth, I am willing to serve his turne better cheape then before is declared.'<sup>7</sup>

Although an increasing number of merchants selling garden seeds in London in the seventeenth century can be identified from surviving records, especially seed catalogues, the organization of the retail trade in seeds continued as before.<sup>8</sup> Seed merchants were still non-specialists: a London grocer was involved in court action over seeds sold

<sup>3</sup> Richard Gardiner, *Profitable instructions for the manuring, sowing, and planting of kitchen gardens*, 1599; Harvey, *op cit* p 70; N McKendrick, J Brewer, J H Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society*, 1982.

<sup>4</sup> Malcolm Thick, 'Garden seeds in England before the late eighteenth century – I, seed growing', *Ag Hist Rev*, XXXVIII, 1, 1990. E Power and M M Postan, ed, *Studies in English Trade in the Fifteenth Century*, 1933, vi, 'The Grocers of London, A Study of Distributive Trade', S Thrupp, pp 281, 283, 291.

<sup>5</sup> Sir Hugh Plat, *The second part of the Garden of Eden*, 1675, p 130.

<sup>6</sup> R Gardiner, *op cit*; Barbara Winchester, *Tudor Family Portrait*, 1955, pp 116–7; Brien Dietz, ed, *The Port and Trade of London: Documents*, London Rec Soc, 1972, pp 63, 78.

<sup>7</sup> Gardiner, *op cit*.

<sup>8</sup> The most comprehensive work on seed catalogues is to be found in J Harvey, *Early Gardening Catalogues*, 1972, and *idem*, *Early Horticultural Catalogues*, 1973.

by him to other merchants in 1619, John Winthrop bought seeds for the New World from another grocer in Lombard Street in 1631, and druggists retailed seeds to provincial customers in 1649 and 1652. Shops selling seeds were, however, well known in London by mid-century: Walter Blithe mentions them in 1653 and Robert Sharrock found cabbage seed growers regularly supplying 'the Shops in London' in 1660.<sup>9</sup>

Buying from these London seedsmen, as from all London retailers, was a slow business, either a list of requirements was sent, in the hope that the seeds could be supplied, or the customer had to travel to the capital and shop in person. In the winter of 1648/9 Theophilus, gardener to Lord Petrie at Ingatestone in Essex, went to London and spent some days going between different seedsmen and nurserymen buying seeds and plants and arranging for package and delivery back to Essex. Trade was seasonal. Seeds were harvested late in the year and sold in winter and early spring for the new season's planting. The nobility and gentry, or their gardeners, who visited London seedsmen personally did so in the winter months during the social 'season'.<sup>10</sup>

## II

The survival of inventories of two London seedsmen, Thomas Browne and John Reynolds, taken in 1652 and 1673 respectively, enables us to see into the shops and homes of these two individuals not long before many London retailers began to adopt new selling techniques. The inventories detail

businesses which were going concerns: Browne's goods were listed as part of an action for debt and although Reynolds' goods were appraised after his death, he died only four years after finishing his apprenticeship, leaving a young child – indications that his death was not preceded by a slow decline into old age. Both men lived and worked in multi-storied houses with businesses carried on from shops on the ground floors. Browne's address is unknown: Reynolds lived in the Old Jewry, a fashionable area of central London.<sup>11</sup>

The bulk of trading stock was kept on the ground floor behind the counters in both shops, although Browne also had some seeds in an attic. Seeds were stored in sacks and bags; Browne's appraisers came across thirty bags full of seeds in one part of his shop, and a further eighteen in another. He had empty onion seed bags of various sizes, 13 half-hundred bags, 20 quarter-hundred bags, and 30 small onion bags; perhaps he sold the seed in bulk in such bags. (The full range of Reynolds' stock can be seen in the appendix.)

The total amount of stock on hand which had to be financed depended on the size of a business and the time of the year. Arthur Clephane, an Edinburgh seedsman in the first decade of the eighteenth century, spent somewhere between £420 and £540 in a year on purchases. John Reynolds' stock was valued at about £42 but this was in early April, towards the end of the main seed selling period of winter and spring.<sup>12</sup>

Some seeds, such as peas and beans were sold by dry measure and Reynolds had a full set: bushel, ½ bushel, peck, ½ peck, quart, and two ½ quarts. Both men had considerable quantities of weighing equipment; large beams with leaden weights for

<sup>9</sup> Harvey, *Early Nurserymen*, p 4; ERO, D/DP/A171; Corporation of London RO, Mayors Court Interrogatories, MC6/389 a&b; PRO, Req 2 308/8; Walter Blith, *English Improver Improved*, 1653, p 179; Robert Sharrock, *The History of the Propagation and Improvement of Vegetables*, Oxford, 1660, p 33.

<sup>10</sup> ERO, D/DP/A171; M De la Quintiney, *The Complete Gardener*, translated by G London and H Wise, 1719, p ii, Stephen Switzer, *The Country Gentleman's Companion*, 1732, p ix; F J Fisher, 'The development of London as a centre for conspicuous consumption in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', *T RHS*, 4th series, XXX, 1948, 43.

<sup>11</sup> CLRO, Orphan's Inventories, Box II, Common Serjeant's Book II, fol 325b; CLRO, Mayors Court Original Bills, 89, 159; M J Power, 'The social topography of Restoration London', in A L Beier and Roger Finlay, ed, *The making of the Metropolis, London 1500-1700*, 1986, pp 200-201.

<sup>12</sup> T Donnelly, 'Arthur Clephane, Edinburgh Merchant and Seedsman', *Ag Hist Rev*, XVII, 12, 1970.

amounts up to one hundredweight, smaller copper scales (counter scales) for, say, two or three pounds of seeds, and fine scales with brass pans and weights for fine and expensive seeds where half an ounce or so might only be sold at a time. On Browne's counter rested his record books, the most important of which listed his customers' outstanding accounts. From Reynolds' customers' account book his appraisers extracted an alphabetical list of his debtors.

On the customers' side of the counter and on the stall in front of the shop, seeds were displayed in small barrels and boxes from which customers were served. Browne had 23 boxes and 18 small barrels for display whilst Reynolds had 3 boxes, 1 vat and 3 half-vats, and 36 small barrels. For keeping very fine seeds and flower seeds both seedsmen were equipped with flower boxes and nests of boxes, ie miniature chests of drawers. Purchases were packed in bags if large, or, to be sent some distance, sealed with leaden seals. Browne had four reams of foolscap paper and thread for wrapping smaller items. Reynolds sold only seeds but Browne could also supply garden spades, hoes, coal and tobacco, the latter displayed in two large glass jars on the counter. Neither sold any plants or tree stocks unless such items, being perishable, were not valued by the appraisers.

The shops, with their counters, display boards, tubs and boxes, probably attracted many cash customers who, because they generated no bills or correspondence, cannot now be identified. Reynolds did, however, have many credit customers. Some were commercial gardeners or nurserymen. An Essex gardener who was himself a seedseller owed him £4 3s 11d; the well-known nurseryman Captain Leonard Gurl owed £10; and two kitchen gardeners from the Neat House gardens in Westminster owed £1 10s and £5 3s 4d respectively. The remaining 116 debtors mostly owed

between £1 and £10. The majority were gentry, styled 'Mr' or 'Mrs' in the ledger.<sup>13</sup>

In common with other shopkeepers, seedsmen had to finance the many debts owed to them by customers. When John Reynolds died in 1673 he was owed a total of £784 9s 7d, over fourteen times the valuation of his stock and shopfittings. To provide sufficient capital to give credit as well as purchase stocks and cover fixed and running costs, seedsmen themselves had to become debtors. Credit might come from suppliers: the Edinburgh seedsman and general shopkeeper Arthur Clephane offered to pay a London merchant in 1705 as follows, 'I will send you a bill for one half, as for the other you must allow me four months credit until I get my money from the country'. John Reynolds partially financed his debtors by himself borrowing £400 on bond from two lenders. Thomas Browne was taken to court in 1652 for non-payment of a debt of £200; probably he too had borrowed pending payment of his bills.<sup>14</sup>

The inventories of the private goods of the two households do not disclose luxury, but some degree of domestic comfort. Browne's kitchen was well stocked with pewter and iron ware, there were five leather chairs in one bedroom, and window curtains, books, carpets, a round table and a looking glass in what was probably the parlour. Reynolds lived and traded from a three-storey house, with at least five private rooms.

### III

John Harvey, basing his comments on surviving printed trade catalogues, estimated there to have been only three major seed firms in London in 1688. In 1730 he

<sup>13</sup> John Harvey, 'Leonard Gurl's nurseries and some others', *Garden History*, III, 3, 1975; F W Steer, *Farm and Cottage Inventories of Mid-Essex, 1635-1749*, Chelmsford, 1969, p 144; Westminster City Library, 1049/10/Box1/3.

<sup>14</sup> Donnelly, *op cit*.

thought there were five such London firms, with at least a dozen in 1760, and thirty-five by the 1780s. Harvey may have understated the number of seventeenth-century firms because many, like Browne and Reynolds, issued no catalogues, although John Beale's rhetorical question in 1677 'Where are the Seeds and Seeds-men?', does suggest that such traders were few. As the eighteenth century progressed and catalogues, trade-cards, and other forms of advertising were increasingly used by seedsmen, Harvey's figures are likely to be accurate. A marked increase in specialized London firms may have occurred not long before 1760 for, in 1747, the trade was still said to be 'in few hands'.<sup>15</sup>

The growth in the specialized garden seed trade was paralleled by that of the associated trades of nurseryman, garden designer, and employed gardener. By the second half of the eighteenth century most provincial towns had at least one general seed, nurseryware, and garden equipment shop and many also had general nurseries. The London suburbs by this time could boast of many large, comprehensive nurseries as well as specialist firms concentrating on just some of the increasing range of flowers, shrubs, and trees in cultivation. Throughout the eighteenth century general shops in small towns and pedlars in the countryside would have continued to sell a few garden seeds.<sup>16</sup>

According to Richard Campbell's *London Tradesman*, describing the economic characteristics of all trades in London at the time, in 1747 'The Seed-Shopkeeper sells all manner of Grass Seeds, Gardener's Tools, Matts, &c and some of them are Nursery-Men, and furnish Gentlemen with young Trees, both Fruit and Forest, with Flower-Roots, &c. It is a very profitable Branch'. Campbell estimated the capital required to set up as a seedsman at between £100 and

£500, making the typical mid-eighteenth-century seed firm of a size similar to that of Reynolds' and Browne's businesses in the previous century.<sup>17</sup>

As Campbell recognized, the distinction between seedsman and nurseryman, became, in terms of retail sales, increasingly blurred in the eighteenth century as seedsmen sold seeds to nursery gardeners and nurserymen in turn sold plants and trees wholesale to seedsmen. Such an interchange allowed both traders to offer a wider range of goods to customers, although encroachment into each other's trades could lead to friction. The leading nurserymen George London and Henry Wise acidly remarked on 'Gentlemen coming to London at the Seasons of Planting, and observing often that Bundles of Trees are standing at the Seed-Mens Shops, or at least meeting with some of their printed Catalogues, in which they make large Offers of the Sale of all their Sorts of Fruit trees, Ever-greens, Flowering Shrubs, and Roots; but with what Certainty any one may depend upon the Truth of what is offered, or what Reason they should have to buy of them rather than of the Gardener, we leave them to judge; knowing very well that none of those grow in their Shops.' The garden designer and nurseryman Stephen Switzer was unpopular with established seedsman when he entered the trade in the 1720s.<sup>18</sup>

The growth of commercial enterprises of all sorts associated with gardening formed a small part of the general increase in, and development of, retailing and consumer services in the eighteenth century which was at the heart of what has been called 'The Birth of a Consumer society'.<sup>19</sup> These changes, present to a smaller extent in the late seventeenth century as consumer

<sup>17</sup> Campbell, *op cit*, pp 275, 339.

<sup>18</sup> Campbell, *op cit*, p 275; Harvey, *Early Gardening Catalogues*, 1972, p 29; De la Quintiney, *Complete Gardener*, p ii; Switzer, *op cit*, p x.

<sup>19</sup> The arguments in this and the subsequent paragraph are gleaned from the collection of stimulating articles which form McKendrick, *et al*, *Consumer Society*, 1982, where the topic is examined in depth.

<sup>15</sup> Harvey, *Early Nurserymen*, pp 5-7, 70; Richard Campbell, *The London Tradesman*, 1747, p 275.

<sup>16</sup> Harvey, *Early Nurserymen*, pp 90-106, 196-8; N McKendrick, J Brewer, and J H Plumb, *Consumer Society*, p 325.

expenditure in England increased, accelerated in the eighteenth century as a number of favourable economic and social conditions interacted: good harvests lowered food prices and provided more households with money to spend on other things; a larger proportion of wages paid in cash, longer working hours, and more work for women and children gave households more disposable income; prosperity in the higher ranks of society encouraged conspicuous consumption; a flexible class structure allowed people to rise up the social scale as they acquired wealth and encouraged social emulation via goods and services; and London, with its large and rapidly growing population of all social classes, acted as a centre for the sale and consumption of goods and services as well as an advertisement to the whole country of the latest novelties on offer.

Above all, the consumer society which emerged in the eighteenth century was shaped by the changing attitudes towards consumption of many people in England. Goods previously regarded by those with limited means as necessities to be purchased once in a lifetime (or even inherited), became subject to fashion and taste, discarded periodically for new models. The mass of the population, if they could afford it, aped fashions adopted by the rich, and all classes of society were increasingly willing to buy new goods, as well as new varieties of familiar commodities. Eventually there developed a general expectation that new things would constantly appear for sale (even when, in the case of new breeds of animal and plant, such novelty posed ethical and theological problems). The period saw, in short, the emergence of *fashion* as an engine for sustaining consumer demand and stimulating its growth. Seedsmen in London and elsewhere were but a small part of this changing world of buying and selling but they did, both in their responses to new demands and (of equal importance) in

encouraging new fashions in gardening, play their part in the general picture.

Growing numbers of seedsmen, nurserymen, gardeners and garden designers served a continuously expanding demand from market gardeners and private pleasure gardeners. Following an estimated elevenfold increase in commercial garden acreage around London between the 1660s and 1720s, market gardening continued to expand during the eighteenth century near the capital and many other towns. Private gardens, much in fashion with the nobility after the Restoration, received further encouragement with the arrival of William III, a monarch who remodelled many royal gardens and whose enthusiasm helped to engender a fashion amongst the Whig oligarchy for large, ostentatious gardens. The taste for gardens had already spread down the social scale by the 1670s when there was 'scarce a cottage in most southern parts of England, but hath its proportionate garden, so great a delight do most men take in it'. John Lawrence wrote in 1717 of 'Gardening being of late Years become the general Delight and Entertainment of the Nobility and Gentry, as well as the Clergy of this Nation' and grumbled at the expense of some new gardens. Lawrence's book was aimed at the clergy and other gentlemen of modest means 'not to make them envy'd by Magnificence, but to make them happy, by loving an innocent Diversion'. Looking back in 1765, Philip Miller thought, 'The improvements which have been made in the art of Gardening, within fifty years past, are very great; so that we may without presumption affirm, that every part of this art is in as great perfection at this time in England, as in any part of Europe', and an early nineteenth-century historian believed that the previously slow development of gardening 'burst forth in all splendour during the eighteenth century. Never did circumstances more successfully combine for the improvement of any art, than they did for the promotion of Horticulture'. J H

Plumb has concluded that, by the second half of the eighteenth century, 'Tens of thousands of men and women, probably hundreds of thousands, were actively concerned in horticulture, eager for novelty and determined on improvement.'<sup>20</sup>

The increasing role of fashion in gardening was noticed by the shrewd observer of social change Bernard Mandeville who wrote in 1723, 'The many ways of laying out a Garden Judiciously are almost Innumerable, and what is call'd Beautiful in them varies according to the different Tastes of Nations and Ages. In Grass Plats, Knots and Parterr's a great diversity of Forms is generally agreeable'. Modest amateur gardeners who delighted in perfecting a narrow range of 'florists flowers' were also slaves to fashion: Mandeville observed 'How Whimsical is the florist in his Choice! Sometimes the Tulip, sometimes the Auricula, and at other times the Carnation shall engross his Esteem, and every Year a new Flower in his Judgement beats all the old ones, tho' it is much inferior to them both in Colour and Shape.' In response to this desire for novelty thousands of new plants were introduced into English gardens from abroad and many new varieties were bred. Philip Miller in 1765 thought the number of 'exotick trees, shrubs, and plants which have been brought into England within a half century past . . . nearly equal to those before known here'. The total number of plants cultivated in England is estimated to have risen from about 200 in the mid-sixteenth century to 18,000 in 1839.<sup>21</sup>

In responding to, and shaping, the developing demands for seeds, a most practical and important innovation employed by

seedsmen (and nurserymen) was the printed seed catalogue. The earliest printed lists date from the 1670s and are single, broadside sheets, headed with the name and address of the seedsman. Seeds and plants for sale are set out in categories which, John Harvey has shown, follow a pattern established by garden writers as far back as 1500 and continued into the nineteenth century. The list of Edward Fuller, seedsman in the Strand in the 1680s, for example, is divided as follows: 'Seeds of Roots, Sallad-Seeds, Pot-herb Seeds, Sweet-herb Seeds, Physical Seeds, Flower-Seeds, Seeds of Ever-green and Flowering Trees, Sorts of Peas, Beans, etc, Seeds to improve Land, Flower Roots, Sorts of choice Trees and Plants'. At the foot of the broadsheet 'Spades, Rakes, Hoes, Reels, Lines, Sheers, Wyre Sieves, Bass Mats, and Melon-Glasses' were advertised, together with 'all sorts of Fruit-Trees, and Ever-greens; and . . . Artichokes, Liquorice, Colyflower, Cabbage, and Tarragon Plants'. This list indicates the extent to which a seedsman, operating from a shop in the Strand with no garden ground of his own, could supply plant roots bought in from nurserymen and reminds us that, as well as garden seeds, seedsmen also supplied medicinal seeds and seeds 'to Improve Land' such as clover, trefoil, sainfoin, and french furze.<sup>22</sup>

With time, catalogues became more elaborate and, as more seeds were advertised, larger. The broadside was superseded by the pamphlet, the earliest examples of which are from the 1720s. Not until the final quarter of the eighteenth century were prices printed in the lists and their function before that time was twofold – as an *aide-mémoire* to customers when compiling seed orders (the frequency with which catalogues are found within estate archives seems to indicate that they were kept for several years by customers until succeeded by new

<sup>20</sup> Malcolm Thick, 'Market Gardening in England and Wales', in J Thirsk, ed, *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, V, ii, Cambridge 1985, pp 507–8; Bradley *op cit*, p 273; Harvey, *Early Nurserymen*, p 75; Worlidge, *op cit*, p 175; J Lawrence, *The Clergy-Mans Recreation*, 1717, pp A3–A4; Philip Miller, *Gardeners Kalendar*, 1765 p vi; G W Johnson, *A History of English Gardening*, 1829, p 147; McKendrick *et al*, *Consumer Society*, p 326.

<sup>21</sup> Bernard Mandeville, *A search into the nature of society*, ed Philip Harth, 1989, pp 332–3; McKendrick *et al*, *Consumer Society*, p 326; Miller, *op cit*, p vii.

<sup>22</sup> Harvey, *Early Gardening Catalogues*, pp 18–19; Kent AO, U269, E 21.

editions) and as a general advertisement of the range of wares on offer to the public. Seedsmen and nurserymen elaborated on the catalogue as advertisement. In 1730 Robert Furber, a Kensington nurseryman, issued a catalogue in the form of twelve plates, 'Twelve Months of Flowers', each an engraving by a Flemish artist of a vase of seasonal blooms. Every flower was numbered with a key on each plate to allow the customer to order seeds or bulbs of the bloom required. Furber later produced a similar series on seasonal fruits. The sets of flower plates were sold at £1 5s plain and £2 12s 6d coloured, by subscription, with the subscribers' names engraved on a thirteenth plate, which included a dedication to the Prince of Wales and the Princess Royal. These engravings not only informed customers of Furber's stock: their sale brought profit to him and the artists who produced them. They enhanced the nurseryman's prestige, both by linking him with works of art and the Royal Family, and by persuading customers that they were in distinguished company. Pirate editions of the engravings provided further 'free' advertising.<sup>23</sup>

A further elaboration on the catalogue was the publication of short books of instruction on gardening by seedsmen and nurserymen which included, or were arranged around, their catalogues. Furber was also early in this field with 'A short introduction to gardening' published in 1733. Stephen Switzer, a leading self-publicist amongst the London seedsmen, produced a collection of pamphlets which ran through several editions and included 'The most expeditious Manner of raising and Propagating Foreign Sallads . . . Italian Brocoli, Spanish Cardoon, Celeriac, Fench, &c', 'The great Improvement of Land by Grass Seeds', and, at the end, a complete

catalogue of his seeds with brief sowing instructions. The first of these pamphlets was essentially a 'puff' to encourage the sale of some imported, (and probably expensive) seeds, to show 'how much these and many other Plants that grow in a Garden contribute to the making a good Dinner; how much, if moderately us'd, to Life and Pleasure itself'. The grass seeds pamphlet was one of a number issued by seedsmen to instruct farmers in such crops. Making sure the customers knew how to raise their seeds was essential to a seedsman's continuing business, for if seeds came to naught because of bad husbandry the seedsman often got the blame.<sup>24</sup>

A complicated web of mutual benefit could surround self-publicity books. 'The Complete seedsman: shewing, the best and easiest method for raising and cultivating every sort of seed . . . To which is added, a catalogue of the seeds, plants, etc, mentioned in this tract, and to be found in a seedsman's shop', was first published as an 84-page pamphlet in 1726. Its authorship was ascribed to Benjamin Townsend, an employee of the nurseryman Benjamin Whitmill, and the seeds in the catalogue could be purchased from the seedshop of Arabella Fuller in the Strand, who also sold the book. It was 'Recommended by R. Bradley' who appeared as the author of a second edition in 1738. In that edition the bookseller, writing that Bradley had revised the text, explained that Bradley was the real author 'the name of Mr Townsend, a gardener, being only put in to it by the author to do him a service, by bringing him into business'. Both men were dead by 1738, and the truth may be that Townsend *was* the author, the bookseller using the well known Professor Bradley's name to revitalize sales of the new edition.<sup>25</sup>

Seed catalogues were printed in some

<sup>23</sup> Harvey, *Early Gardening Catalogues*, p 15; Blanche Henrey, *British Botanical and Horticultural Literature before 1800*, 1975, II, pp 343-7.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, II, p 346. Switzer, *op cit*.

<sup>25</sup> Henrey, *op cit*, II, pp 341-2.

books on gardening not directly financed by seedsmen, and favourable mentions by authors of particular seedsmen and nurserymen appeared in the text. The 1688 edition of John Worlidge's *Systema Horticulturae* contained a nurseryman's catalogue as well as those of three London seedsmen. Richard Bradley was particularly free with his commendations in print of nurserymen and seedsmen and members of those trades sometimes helped authors: ten well-known nurserymen and gardeners signed a statement in the front of Philip Miller's *Gardeners and florists dictionary* of 1724 asserting that it was 'highly useful and necessary for all lovers of gardening'.<sup>26</sup>

Newspapers carried advertisements for garden seeds and, although seedsmen were not as ingenious in their use of this medium as some other traders, they were quick to advertise in it. A political parody in the form of a seedsman's advertisement in 1681 suggests that they were by then commonplace in the press: as with all good parodies, it encapsulates the style of the early advertisements,

If any Protestant Dissenter desire this Spring-time to be furnished with Sedition-Seeds, or the True Protestant Rue, which they call the Herb of Grace, or any hopefull Plants of Rebellion let them repair to these famous French Gardiners, Monsieur F. Smith, Msr L. Curtis, and Msr B. Harris, where they may have not only of all kinds which grew in the Garden of the Late Keepers of the Liberty of England; but much new variety raised by the Art and Industry of the said Gardeners, with directions in print when to sow them, and how to cultivate them when they are raised. You may also have there either green or pickled Sallets of Rumors and Reports far more grateful to your Palate or over a Glass of Wine, then your French Champignons, or mushrooms, Popish Olives, or Eastland Gerkins.<sup>27</sup>

The preoccupation in the eighteenth-century seed trade with novelty is clear in a

newspaper advertisement from the *Evening Post* of 24 February 1722:

Just Imported

A Fresh Parcel of fine Tuberosse Roots, Cork Tree, and Ever-Green Oak Acorns; with above two hundred Curious sorts of Exotick Flower Seeds and Roots: Likewise all other Sorts of Garden and Grass Seeds for Improvement of Land. Sold by Tho. Overton at the Harrow against Middle Row in Hoborn, at reasonable Rates. N.B. Any Person in the Country directing as above, may have them sent by any Coach or Carrier they please.

Stephen Switzer was always keen to find new seeds from abroad to tempt his customers. He regularly dealt with 'a Gentleman in the City, who has long been a great Importer of all curious Seeds' who obtained seeds from Alexandria. Switzer also had a network of agents looking out exotic seeds for him: a Venetian sea captain brought him beans and he acquired 'Murcian Kele' (a type of broccoli) in 1728 'from the Revd Mr Sims, the Chaplain to the British Factory' in Portugal.<sup>28</sup>

The relatively small number of full-time seedsmen in London before 1760, each selling a wide range of garden seeds, faced what was close to perfect competition, one with another. Advertising in print was one way of securing a share of the market, another was to have a shop in a part of the capital frequented by the gentry; seed shops in the eighteenth century were to be found in the Strand, Pall Mall, the New Exchange, and like that of Stephen Switzer, in the extremely fashionable Westminster Hall.<sup>29</sup>

In view of the competition it was essential for a London seedsman to protect his reputation to maintain customer loyalty. Reputation rested primarily on seed quality, a shaky foundation because many seeds were not found to be bad until, many months after purchase, they failed to germinate in customers' gardens, leaving the customer with much wasted effort and the seedsman

<sup>26</sup> Henrey, *op cit*, II, pp 319, 320, 339; Bradley, *op cit*, II, pp 5, 93, 127, 154, 220.

<sup>27</sup> *Heraculitus Ridens: A Dialogue between Jest and Earnest, concerning the Times*, Tues, February 15, 1681.

<sup>28</sup> Switzer, *op cit*, pp vi, 19, 21.

<sup>29</sup> Switzer, *op cit*, title page, p x; Henrey, *op cit*, II, pp 341, 359, 376-7.

as an obvious target for his wrath. Stephen Switzer was very particular over his reputation, explaining at some length in print in 1728 his side of a story put around to discredit him. He in turn sought to sow doubts about his competitors, writing that he could not say that 'some of them do not knowingly and willfully sell those Commodities that they are sure will not grow'. This accusation prompted further 'ill Will . . . against me by some of my Brother Seedsmen' which could not have been lessened by a renewed attack on most of his competitors who he had 'but little Acquaintance with' knowing them only 'by their printed Bills and the Imperfections with which they abound'.<sup>30</sup>

Aware of the damage to business poor quality seed could cause, Switzer sought to stave off criticism by telling his customers of the many reasons why seeds failed which were outside a seedsman's control. Imported seeds were a particular problem. Switzer complained about Italian broccoli seed: 'The greatest Difficulty that attends this Affair in the getting Seeds from abroad, is, the great Cheat that those People, who gather it on the Sea-side, put upon the merchant, and consequently upon us here . . . so little Faith is to be found amongst those Collectors of Seeds, who no doubt think it no Sin to cheat Hereticks'. Switzer thought foreign seed could also fail because it was old, having been too long on the journey to England. Other reasons for bad seed of which a seedsman might be innocent were: seeds not fully ripened in a bad year; seed growers piling 'hot' seeds such as onion in too large a pile to dry, causing fermentation; seeds incorrectly sown by customers which consequently would not germinate; and failure to germinate due to adverse soil or weather conditions. He also claimed that some head gardeners, resenting their masters' buying seeds on their behalf rather than leaving it to them, in revenge deliberately sowed their

own inferior seed, and blamed their masters' seedsmen. Switzer assured his customers that he never engaged 'in the buying and selling that which I certainly knew was not good' and 'whenever I have had the least occasion of distrusting the Goodness of the Commodities I have told Gentlemen, and have publish'd Advertisements of it, as soon as I have made discovery of it'.<sup>31</sup>

#### IV

Seed-selling was only a minute segment of the retail trade in London and other major towns by the 1760s. It had, however, an importance belying mere size. The rapid expansion of market gardening, particularly for vegetables, in England throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries required ever increasing amounts of seed. For a gardener to save his own seed was time-consuming, labour-intensive, and technically difficult. By obviating this task seedsmen facilitated the growth of commercial gardening. What was difficult for the commercial gardeners was doubly so for most private gardeners with limited skill and time. The numerous works on gardening published in the eighteenth century, many of them quite cheap books giving basic instructions for the amateur, testify both to the growing demand for seeds from the public and to the growing importance of gardening as a leisure activity and as a source of fresh, home-produced food. Grand gardens designed and constructed in the period required seeds, plants, and trees on demand on a scale hitherto not seen. Much of a seedsman's trade, however, came from people with small gardens and few horticultural skills. Seeds, small and relatively cheap, costing many customers but a few shillings a year, nevertheless underpinned much useful and pleasurable activity.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Switzer, *op cit*, pp ix, 52.

<sup>31</sup> Switzer, *op cit*, pp 2, 48-52.

<sup>32</sup> Henry, *op cit*, II, pp 631 et seq; Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain, 1660-1760*, 1988, pp 116, 124, 129.

Garden seed selling had some influence on agriculture as a whole. The passion for new flowers and vegetables encouraged plant breeding: peas were a speciality of a Bedfordshire gardener who gave his name to several varieties, and others bred new varieties of flowers. The leading London nurseryman Thomas Fairchild did pioneering work on hybridization of flowers although, when he successfully crossed a sweet william with a carnation in 1717, he had moral scruples about tampering with nature. By the end of the century, flower breeding had become both a commercial enterprise and an absorbing hobby.<sup>33</sup>

'Seeds to improve land' – clover, trefoil, sainfoin, lucerne, ryegrass, french furze, flax, and many more as the period progressed, were included in most printed seed catalogues from the 1670s having been available from London seedsmen by the middle of the seventeenth century. From the 1670s seedsmen commonly gave away free with each order of these seeds a 'paper of directions' giving brief instructions on cultivation. It is reasonable to suppose that some gentlemen first came into contact with these field crops by going to a seedsman for garden seeds or receiving by post a new edition of a catalogue. The printed directions bolstered the confidence of uncertain innovators and, like trade cards and other printed ephemera produced by seedsmen, advertised the business. It would be rash to hazard a guess as to how many acres of clover or sainfoin were sown because of a visit to a seedsman for garden seeds but it is certain that some farmers had little more than a seedsman's 'paper of directions' or brief instructions in a seedsman's advertisement to guide them when they first tried such crops.<sup>34</sup>

For many gentlemen the seeds of new varieties of garden vegetables and fruit were as much 'improvement' seeds as those of new grasses and legumes. After the Restoration, gentlemen increasingly began exploiting their gardens not only to provide food for their families, but also as a source of profit, selling produce to others who had developed a palate for new and delicate fruit and vegetables. The flow of new seeds from seedsmen helped to sustain this remunerative sideline.<sup>35</sup>

Some garden vegetables were tried in fields for animal fodder. The turnip was the most successful of these transplants, shifting in men's minds in the first half of the eighteenth century from a garden to a field crop. Carrots and cabbages followed the turnip more cautiously into the fields aided, no doubt, by the availability of seeds and advice from seedsmen. The richest gentlemen who interested themselves in agricultural improvement had access to books and to the wisdom of others, gleaned from social contact and travel, and had the resources to proceed by trial and error. Less wealthy men must have valued the counsel of a growing number of seedsmen, whether obtained first hand in their shops; from their catalogues, flysheets and books; or as individual notes written with batches of seeds dispatched to country customers. Seedsmen, like nurserymen and gardeners, had a store of practical advice which it was in their commercial interest to share with their customers.<sup>36</sup>

#### Appendix

##### Seeds in John Reynolds' shop on 2 April 1673

###### *Garden Vegetable Seeds*

46 [lb?]	onion
7 bu	spinach
13 bu	radish

<sup>33</sup> Harvey, *Early Nurserymen*, pp 76, 81–82; Ruth Duthie, *Florists' Flowers and Societies*, 1988; McKendrick *et al*, *Consumer Society*, pp 323–5.

<sup>34</sup> Malcolm Thick, *op cit*, *AHEW*, V, ii, p 530; Frank V Emery, 'The Mechanics of Innovation: Clover Cultivation in Wales before 1750', *Jnl Hist Geog*, II, I, 1976, 39–40.

<sup>35</sup> Joan Thirsk, 'Agricultural Innovations and their Diffusion', *AHEW*, V, ii, pp 562, 568–71, 580.

<sup>36</sup> David Hey, 'Yorkshire and Lancashire', *AHEW*, V, i, p 81; Thick, *op cit*, *AHEW*, V, ii, p 532; Thirsk, *op cit*, *AHEW*.

9 lb	lettuce
2 cwt	carrot
1 cwt	cabbage
12 bu	turnip
97 lb	cucumber
53 lb	endive
36 lb	sorrel
5 lb	cauliflower
40 lb	beet
1 bu	peas
6 lb	languedebœuf
1 [bush?]	muskmelon
2 lb	succory [chicory]
2 bu	kidney beans
6 lb	crass
36 lb	leek

*Culinary Herb and Medicinal Seeds*

3 bu	caraway
6 lb	sweet marjoram
60 lb	coriander
1 bu	fennel
70 lb	pot marjoram
1 bu	parsley

48lb	dill
42 lb	scurvey grass
1 bu	mustard seed
70 lb	gromwell
50 lb	bugloss
1 lb	thyme
22 lb	clary

*Seeds 'to improve Land'*

½bu	flax
2 bu	cinquefoil
3 bu	canary seed
30 lb	burr

*Trees*

3 pecks	juniper berries
½bu	fir & pine apples
2 lb	cypress

*Flowers*

30 lb	poppy
3 lb	stock gillyflower

*And, 'Divers small quantities of fine seeds and flower seeds'*

## Notes on Contributors

MALCOLM THICK is a Tax Inspector. A graduate of Queen's University, Belfast, he did some years of postgraduate research at Oxford and qualified as a teacher in 1974. He has contributed the chapter on 'Market Gardening' to volume v of the *Agrarian History of England and Wales*. An article on the role of root crops as food for London's poor in the period 1550-1650 will be published in May 1990 and a paper read to the 1989 Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery will appear soon. At the moment he is engaged on a detailed study of the market gardeners at the Neat Houses in Westminster in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

DR GAVIN BOWIE works for Hampshire Museums, and is responsible for a lively community museum in the town of Eastleigh. He began agricultural history research in 1978, initially to meet the needs of the Hampshire Farm Museum project, and largely prompted by the lack of reliable secondary source material on which to base museum displays and interpretation. Since 1982 he has researched changes in English chalkland farming, c. 1600-1850, largely as a spare-time activity, and has had two papers on the subject published in the *Review* in recent years.

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DR CORMAC Ó GRÁDA is Statutory Lecturer in Economics at University College, Dublin. He is the author of *Before and After the Famine*, Manchester, 1988, *The Great Irish Famine*, 1989, and about three dozen articles, mainly on the economic history of Ireland since 1800. He is currently at work on aspects of nineteenth-century Irish monetary history and on his contribution to Floud and McCloskey's revised *Economic History of Britain*, and he has half-finished *Ireland: A New Economic History*, Oxford, forthcoming.

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