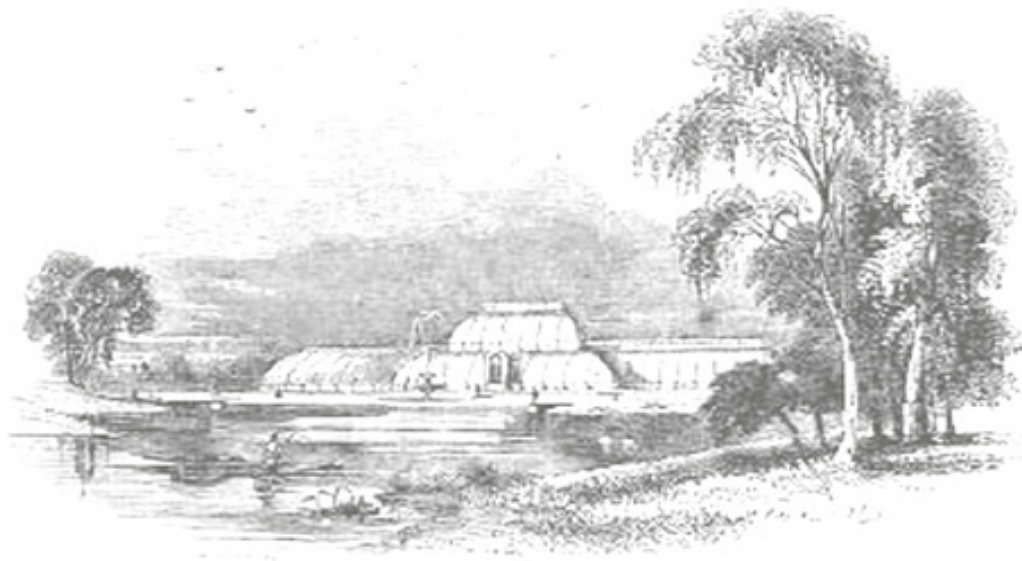


**Detlef Schmidt**  
**The Plant life of**  
**William Curtis**



**Royal Botanic Garden - KEW**



*William Curtis*  
**Author of Curtis' s Botanical Magazine**

## **Detlef Schmidt**



Born 1955 in Berlin

Biological laboratory technician,  
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entomologist

### **Important note for the user**

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**The author**

**August 2021**



**Fig.** William Curtis

(\* 11 January 1746 in Alton, Hampshire; † 7 July 1799 in Brompton) was an English botanist, apothecary and entomologist. His official botanical author code is "CURTIS".

The plant genus *Curtisia* AIT. from the dogwood family (Cornaceae) has been named after him.

Curtis was head of the Chelsea Physic Garden. He founded botanical gardens at Bermondsey, Lambeth in 1771 and Brompton in 1789. In 1787 Curtis founded the **Botanical Magazine** and was its editor until his death.

Curtis's Botanical Magazine is one of the greatest scientific journals of all time. Started in 1787, the journal is still published today. It is the oldest existing journal with coloured plates, of which more than 11,000 have now been produced. The volumes are the work of many renowned botanical artists and provide an exceptional pictorial record of floral fashions and plant introductions in Britain over the last two centuries.

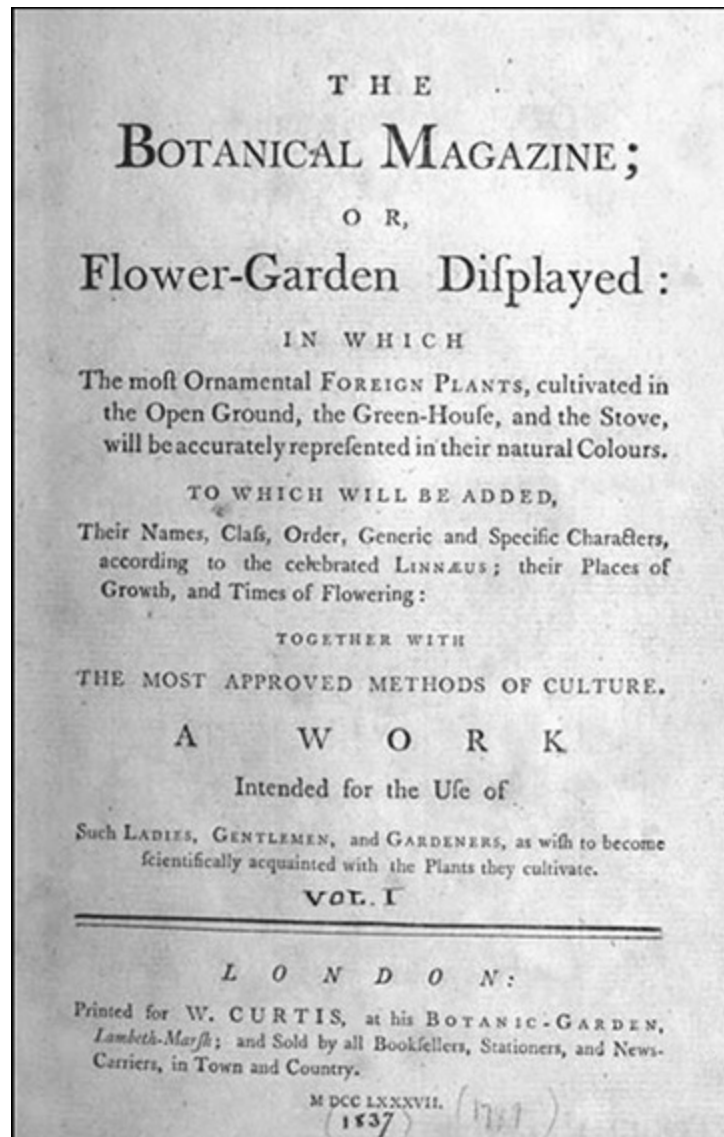
The first issue of the journal, which was to portray ornamental and foreign plants, appeared on 1 February 1787. A small publication in octavo format, it consisted of three hand-coloured plates with brief descriptions in letterpress. Priced at one shilling, it was an immediate success; the first issue sold over 3000 copies.

CURTIS'S  
 BOTANICAL MAGAZINE,  
CONTAINING THE  
 COLLECTION OF FLOWERS  
 PLANTS  
 Plants of the Royal Gardens of Kew,  
 AND  
 FLOWERS  
 OF OTHER BOTANICAL ESTABLISHMENTS IN GREAT BRITAIN.  
 WITH SUITABLE DESCRIPTIONS.  
 AND  
 A SUPPLEMENT OF BOTANICAL AND HORTICULTURAL INFORMATION.  
 BY  
 R WILLIAM JACKSON COOKER, K.H., D.C.L., O.S.  
C. D. F. R. S. and L. S. Vice-President of the Linnean Society, and Director of the Royal Gardens of Kew.

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 Three FAVORITE and Most POPULAR  
 VOL. I.  
 OF THE THIRD SERIES.  
 Vol. LXXI.

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**Fig.** Collection of Flowers



**Fig.** Flower Garden Displayed

The first copper plate depicting the Persian iris was drawn by James Sowerby. Described as "highly esteemed by all flower lovers" for its "beauty, early appearance and fragrant flowers".



**Plate 1 (Volume 1 von 1787) Persian iris (Iris Persica L.)**

**James Sowerby** was born in London on 21 March 1757 and died in Lambeth (London) on 25 October 1822. Sowerby was a British naturalist, zoologist and painter. His official botanical author code is "SOWERBY".





James Sowerby  
Paintings by Thomas Heaphy (1816)

Sowerby was the son of the engraver John Sowerby and his wife Arabella Goodreed. In 1771, at the age of 14, he joined the studio of the marine painter Richard Wright as an apprentice. When Wright fell seriously ill, Sowerby moved to William Hodges.

On 1 December 1777, Sowerby began studying art at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, specialising in miniature painting. It was precisely these skills that caught the eye of William Curtis, who immediately engaged him as an illustrator for his *Flora Londonensis*. Through his collaboration with Curtis, Sowerby also made the acquaintance of the botanists Charles Louis L'Héritier de Brutelle and William Withering, for whom he later also worked.

Through his fellow student Robert de Carle in Norwich, Sowerby came into contact with natural scientists such as James Edward Smith and Dawson Turner. This meeting gave rise to English Botany, known today as "Sowerby's Botany", between 1790 and 1814.



**Plate 26 (Volume 1, 1787)**  
**Variegated Stapelia**  
(*Stapelia variegata* L.)

Sowerby's artistic work earned him the title of "Fellow" of the Linnean Society of London in 1793, and he was admitted as a full member just five years later. During these years, Sowerby also became friends with the natural scientist Joseph Banks.

On 25 October 1822, James Sowerby died at home in Lambeth, London, after a long illness at the age of 65. His two sons James de Carle Sowerby and George Brettingham Sowerby I continued their father's work after his death.

The plant genus *Sowerbaea* SM. from the asparagus family (Asparagaceae) and the Sowerby toothed whale (*Mesoplodon bidens*) from the beaked whale family (Ziphiidae) were named in honour of James Sowerby.

William Curtis recognised his passion for flora and fauna at an early age. However, he first did an apprenticeship as an

apothecary. However, after moving from Hampshire to London in 1766 to pursue this trade, his botanical interests prevailed and he gave up his career to earn a living by teaching and writing. His first publication was a pamphlet on collecting and preserving insects. In 1773 he was appointed demonstrator of botany at the Chelsea Physical Garden. After leaving this post in 1777, he opened his own London Botanic Garden at Lambeth Marsh. He later moved the garden to Brompton.

Curtis' first major publication was *Flora Londinensis*. This work, begun in 1774, aimed to illustrate the plants growing in London. At that time, however, there was generally more interest in showy exotic plants than in the native 'weeds' of London. Despite its beautifully produced colour plates, it was a financial failure and was never completed. However, there was a need for a work on the many new plants from overseas that garden lovers wanted to grow at home. Curtis saw an opportunity to recoup some of the losses he had suffered and published his *Botanical Magazine*. He initially used the artists he had already employed for the *Flora Londinensis*, such as James Sowerby and William Kilburn, who could draw plant specimens from his own botanical garden.

However, the artist who dominated the early years of the magazine was Sydenham Teast Edwards. Curtis became aware of his talent and arranged for him to train as a botanical artist in London. He was only nineteen when his first plate was published in the *Botanical Magazine* in 1788. More than 1700 followed over the next 27 years - some posthumously - to the practical exclusion of other artists. The plates illustrated on page 9 and page 10 are an example of his work. At first Edwards drew and engraved the plates himself, but from 1792 Francis Sansom took over the engraving. A few years before his death, Edwards left

the Botanical Magazine to start his own **Botanical Register**. The reason for this was that 12 of his plates were mistakenly attributed to Sowerby.

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Magazine  
Royal Botanic Gardens (Kew)  
Source reference  
The following were helpful in putting the book together



**Plate 279 (Volume 8, 1794) Red Plumeria (Plumeria rubra L.)**



**Plate 284 (Volume 8, 1794) Perpetual Rose**  
(*Rosa semperflorens* W.M.Curtis)

The beautiful hand-coloured plates are the main attraction of the magazine. The illustrations of the first copies of the magazine are still largely bright and fresh after two hundred years.

As Curtis states in the preface to the first edition, the plates were "always drawn from the living plant and coloured as close to nature as the imperfections of the colouring permit".

Since artistic freedom was hardly possible, each artist had to draw the preparations accurately and precisely in order to create a scientifically authoritative work.

Up to volume 70, the plates were produced with copperplate engravings, with each copy coloured with watercolours. Considering that in the early years of the journal up to 3,000 copies per issue (with an average of 3 plates) were published, one can imagine that it was impossible to achieve a uniform colouring.

Different colourists achieved different results, and even the pigments used were not necessarily of the same quality.

At times, about 30 people were busy colouring the illustrations of the Botanical Magazine.

Not only was the repetitive work tedious, but low wages did not promote high standards and there were inevitable variations in care and accuracy as a result.

Incredibly, despite these problems, the magazine's plates were all hand-coloured until 1948, when a shortage of

colourists forced the magazine to adopt photographic reproductions.

The choice of plants to be described was often influenced by the public's great fondness for the unusual. Initially, European plants were predominantly selected, but in the nineteenth century more and more plants were obtained by botanists from further afield. David Douglas (1799-1834), for example, collected extensively in America on behalf of the Royal Horticultural Society. He travelled across America for eleven years, sending seeds and specimens home at regular intervals. Many of his plants thrived in England and were illustrated in the Botanical Magazine. One of his finds, *Diplopappus incanus* (Lindl.), is illustrated on page 12; the accompanying text explains that the species is native to California, where it was discovered by David Douglas.







**Plate 3383 (Volume 62, 1835):** *Diploppus incanus* (Lindl.)

Initially, the textual description for each plate was quite concise and included the name of the plant, its place in the Linnean classification system, generic and specific descriptions, alternative names, country of origin, flowering time and notes on cultivation. The "English" names given were usually just translations of the scientific name in Latin. Some of the plants were misidentified at the time, and they were also often referred to by names that are now obsolete or outdated. For example, the "current" botanical name of the Winterling is given as *Helleborus hyemalis* (L.), although it has been known as *Eranthis hyemalis* (L.) Salisb. for over a hundred years. This plant is now naturalised in Britain; in 1787 it was scarcely common there



**Plate 3 (Volume 1, 1787) Winterling** (*Eranthis hyemalis* (L.) Salisb.)

In 1799, when the journal had published its thirteenth volume, Curtis died. His friend John Sims (1749-1831), botanist and physician, became the new editor. Sims

renamed the publication Curtis's Botanical Magazine. During his time, the cost of paper increased so much that from 1803 each issue cost three shillings and sixpence. As a result, the circulation fell to less than 1,000 copies.

In 1826 William Jackson Hooker (1785-1865) took over the editorship. Hooker was Professor of Botany at Glasgow University from 1820-1841 until he became Director of Kew in 1841. He came to the journal with a reputation as a very able botanist, and as founder of a rival publication, **Exotica Flora**, he was also an experienced writer on exotic plants. In addition, he was a skilled draughtsman and became the journal's principal illustrator for almost a decade. The plate for *Justica Carneia* shown here is based on one of his drawings. The specimen from which the drawing was taken is from the Botanic Gardens in Glasgow.



**Plate 3383 (Volume 62, 1835) Flesh-coloured Justicia**  
(*Justicia Carnea* Lindl.)



**Sir William Jackson Hooker**

