

Chapter 11

Other Bulbs

The main volume of commercial bulb production in Great Britain is in daffodils and tulips only. There is however considerable interest in other spring and summer flowering bulbs and every bulb wholesaler and retailer and garden centre carries a range of other bulbs often listed in the catalogue as miscellaneous and spring bulbs. These are not grown in the U.K. in any great quantity except where planted for cut flowers.

In the open the chief bulbous flower crops are gladioli and iris; iris is also extensively grown in Cornwall where anemones also are grown in small plots for early flowering.

Under glass considerable quantities of gladioli, iris and lilies are being grown to provide continuity of supply with a recent surge of interest in freesia and alstroemeria.

The list of "bulbs" available is very wide from various specialist suppliers and the range commonly includes aconites, crocus, snowdrops, bluebells, muscari, hyacinths, anemones, iris, begonia, lilies, fritillaria and gladioli.

Many of these are supplied by Dutch wholesalers because harvesting some of the small bulbs and corms is easier on their sandy soils. Some species grow very well in England and I can recall seeing fields of hyacinth at Pinchbeck and have picked hyacinth ground keepers from our field at Mill Green recently. Hyacinths were regularly grown by specialist bulb growers until 1939 when the acreage grew to almost 400 acres. Stocks disappeared during the war and were not rebuilt afterwards. There are fields of crocus at Holbeach now and a general interest among growers in producing some of the less common species.

The trade barriers of the world are down and a shipment of bulbs from the Netherlands may well include begonias from Belgium, snowdrops from Asia Minor and gladioli from Bulgaria, wherever they may be found good and cheap.

It is the economics of growing a crop for a limited market against the competition of imports which limits the production on a larger scale here. Some countries have a climatic or soil advantage; from some areas certain bulbs may be gathered from the wild by gypsies or behind the Iron Curtain the exchange rate may be arranged to procure hard currency at any cost and in some, Israel for example, horticulture for export is a planned government policy, a part of a social re-settlement programme irrespective of the value of the financial return.

In spite of the mixed competition there are many firms offering unusual lists and many growers taking up the challenge. To mention but a few: van Tubergen offer a wide range and include some delightful tulip species. Jefferson Browne specialises in daffodils and offers the widest choice of new and exhibition varieties. Dan Du-Plessis and his brother in Cornwall are more commercial growers and carry another wide range of daffodils as do Champernowne Gardens in Devon.

Frank and son John Root are growing large quantities of small bulbs at Holbeach and John Nell and his son Michael are producing amaryllis on some scale.

At their Little London nursery the Goemans family, trading as Parigo, are growers of freesia for cut flowers and are internationally noted as breeders of freesia and alstromeria. Parigo are currently preparing new strains of early gladioli.

Production of lilies is increasing recently. Large quantities have been imported for glasshouse flower production from Holland particularly the orange Enchantment. The availability of virus free stocks of Enchantment and other varieties has enabled growers to set up a production chain growing a clean stock annually in the same way that disease free potato seed is grown in Scotland to replace commercial stock every year.

In a similar way new stocks of anemone are available. This last season all anemones imported were found to have leaf curl (colletotricum) disease, which severely cuts back the anemone flower crop in the south west.

The new strains of St. Piran anemone giving better flowers were bred by Mrs. L.M. Gill at Rosewarne E.H.S., are being sown from seed in Somerset on a vein of very friable soil and are now available in large enough quantities to supply the cut flower growers with sufficient medium size tubers and large ones for the retail market.

Alongside the St. Piran anemone, which is to date free from leaf curl, a further strain of anemone has been developed at the John Innes Institute for production of flowers under glass.

Plant material is available from all over the world and the choice of new subjects for the next decade is an exciting one. I have this year enjoyed a pot of richly hued South African clivia and the enchanting white hymenocallis — what next?