A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE GERBERA PLANT

By Stuart Tindale

Unfortunately, there is a lack of detailed information relative to the history of this plant and this is disappointing.

Gerberas are relatively modern plants compared with many other well-known plants and do not have a long and colourful history.

The first recorded discovery of the species was sometime during the early 1700s and was attributed to a German botanist and medical practitioner by the name of Traugott Gerber, who lived between 1710-1743. He apparently found gerbera plants in eastern Europe or western Russia sometime during his relatively short life, logically in the 1730s. Although some biological historians dispute this and claim that the gerbera was discovered by a Swedish naturalist named Carl Linnaeus, who was a friend of Gerber. Regardless of who the discoverer was, the name of the species certainly came from Gerber.

There is no record, that I can find, that tells us anything about the species that either of these persons found. That is, no colour of flowers, leaf shape, stem length or other identifying characteristic.

Carl Linnaeus is recorded as the first person to frame a system for defining natural genera and species of organisms. He is known as the "Father of Taxonomy" which is the systematic of classification of living organisms. His system was adopted by the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature.

The name gerbera was given to the species by a Dutchman named Jan Frederik Gronovius in 1737. This person was a patron of Linnaeus and also for an American named John Clayton, from Virginia, who was an avid plant collector and had his own herbarium with specimens gathered from all around the world.

However, I have been unable to find and other connection between him and gerberas.

Today we are aware that approximately 40 different species of gerbera have been located in many different countries around the world. WA has its own species named *Trichocline Spathulata* and can be found growing in the Darling Ranges (drawing opposite).

https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-138735769/view

https://florabase.dpaw.wa.gov.au/browse/photo/8251

Following Gerbera's discovery of the species, there is no historical reference to the gerbera plant until a species was discovered by a Scotsman names Robert Jameson in the Transvaal District of South Africa during the 1880s. This species has been given the name *Gerbera Jamesonii* and is the species that most gerberas we have today, have been developed from. Jameson arranged for specimens to be sent to Cape Town and from there some were sent to Royal Botanic Garden in Kew, England.

However, around the time Jameson found the species that was named after him, the curator of the Durbin Botanical Gardens had found a species of gerbera and sent specimens of his findings also to the Kew Gardens. Whether the species that he sent were the same as Jameson had found is unknown, but it is understood that some breeding of new varieties took place during the latter part of the 19th Century. However, little detail of this is known.

After the Royal Horticultural Society's Jubilee Exhibition at Chelsea in 1912, where the first Gerbera flowers were shown, some commercial growers became interested in the plants, particularly in the Netherlands where much of the modern-day breeding of new cultivars has taken place. It is understood that new cultivars were bred from crossing the *Gerbera Jamisonii* with the *Gerbera Viridifolia*, another African species.

There is evidence of hybridisation of gerbera species taking place in France, Germany, Belgium and the USA. There is also suggestion that a species found in Tasmania was used in some of the programmes undertaken in these countries.

Probably the most significant event that occurred in the history of the gerbera was the development of the so-called double flowers, which came about in the late 1940s, early 1950s. This provided a stimulus for massive breeding programmes in many parts of the world, including Australia, that was to lead to the huge range of different plant types and colours that we now have. It also led to a huge increase in the plant's popularity which has achieved a rating of 5th most popular cut flower in the world.

There is no doubt that this development was a factor in the WA Gerbera Society being formed during the 1950s. Fortunately a number of the members of the new society were interested in breeding new varieties through cross-pollinating and their efforts led to plants they bred producing flowers of superior quality compared with those previously available.

Today, virtually none of the very old varieties are grown as they are no longer available, and they would not compare favourably with the more recently developed varieties from an exhibition viewpoint.

Because there is a lack of information relating to early cross-pollinations that have been carried out, it is almost impossible to undertake a breeding programme and be confident of the outcome producing the desired result.

So there you have a brief history of the plant GERBERA.