

# James Shirley Hibberd – A VICTORIAN GOOGLE?

*Dawn Bazely & P. J. MacDougall examine  
the works of an author who popularized gardening*

“Googling” has become one of the main ways that many people obtain information today. Powerful Internet search engines give us unparalleled access to huge quantities of reliable information. The wide availability of high-quality digital cameras and scanners means that we also expect to see beautiful photographs on the Web. But this is not the first time that an expansion of access to information has spurred rapid change. There was the invention of the printing press but another example – important to natural history and botany – occurred during the Victorian Era when affordable, scientifically accurate and beautifully illustrated books on a large variety of topics became widely available.

James Shirley Hibberd (1825-1890), a British journalist and amateur horticulturalist, was the prolific author of a series of popular and practical gardening books, founding editor of the series, *The Floral World and Garden Guide*, and editor of *Gardener's Magazine*. His interests were exhaustive, covering the cultivation and appreciation of roses, ferns, ivy, seaweed, sponges, algae, wildflowers, vegetables, fruits, aquariums and indoor gardening with a range of titles that included *The Town Garden: A Manual for the Management of City and Suburban Gardens*, *Rustic Adornments for Homes of Taste* and *The Rambling Botanist*.

Many of Hibberd's books were illustrated extensively with colour wood-engraved plates printed by Benjamin Fawcett, considered one of the best colour woodblock printers of the nineteenth century. It's easy to forget how astounding these detailed images must have appeared to the average Victorian in an age before television, photography and the Internet.

These affordable books helped to popularize gardening, botany and natural history among the



*Aucuba Japonica  
Aureo-Maculata*



*Tasconia buchanani*

middle and lower classes. Prior to this, gardening had mainly been a pursuit of the aristocracy and the very wealthy who were able to hire armies of gardeners and landscape architects.

The library of Massey College in the University of Toronto holds a unique collection devoted to the History of the Book and the related arts of printing, papermaking, bookbinding and typography. Many of Hibberd's titles are found in the Ruari McLean Collection of nineteenth-century books, representative of the development of Victorian colour printing, illustration and publishers' bindings. The two accompanying illustrations are from books in this special collection and show the high quality of these wood-engraved images – as good as the highest pixel camera available today!

The TBG library holds a 1986 facsimile reprint of Hibberd's *The Amateur's Flower Garden*, originally published in 1871 by Groombridge & Sons. ◊

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