Plant Portraits

Walking Sticks As Seed Savers—The Case Of The Jersey Kale [*Brassica oleracea* L. Convar. *Acephala (DC.)* Alef. Var. *Viridis* L.]

One of the most familiar, morphologically diverse, and taxonomically challenging of all temperate crops is *Brassica oleracea* L. It has a maritime subspecies, *oleracea,* found along cliffs in western Europe east as far as Italy (Tutin et al. 1993), and has been developed into a number of varieties or convarieties each offering us different plant parts as food. This "marvellous progeny" (as Bailey (1922) called it) includes the flower-heads of cauliflower and broccoli, the leaves of kale and savoy, the terminal buds of head cabbage, the axillary ones of Brussels sprouts and the stem bases of kohlrabi (all illustrated in Vaughan and Geissler 1997). *Brassica oleracea* L. convar. *acephala* (DC.) Alef. var. *viridis* L. (following treatment in Mansfeld 1986), a name that covers the kales, is also an important livestock fodder, but only in the Channel Islands—between France and the UK—have the stems given birth to a bizarre and locally distinctive product: walking sticks. Kew's Economic Botany Collections contain four such sticks, donated in 1888 (two), 1939 and 1983 (Fig. 1). Large yet lightweight, and highly varnished, they are vestiges of an industry which, in its heyday a century ago, reportedly saw annual sales (and export from the largest island, Jersey) of 30 000 (Pitcairn-Knowles 1906). Since the main local use of the Jersey kale as fodder has long since ceased, the continued use of the plant for walking sticks has possibly been its salvation.

In the Channel Islands this kale had a rich variety of English vernacular names like Jersey cabbage, giant cabbage, and long jacks (on Jersey), and French ones like *chour* (on Jersey) and *grand chou à vacque* (on Guernsey) (Bonnard 1993; Parker and Cox 1974). Its origin is obscure but by 1836 it was certainly "much cultivated" in Jersey (Parker and Cox 1974, quoting an extract from *The Farmer's Magazine*). It had been introduced to England in 1827 and has been cultivated "on and off" in the USA since the 1840s (Weaver 1997). Many authors (quoted by Parker and Cox 1974) mention the size of the leaves (up to 0.75 m long), and how these were stripped by farmers and fed to livestock. Flourishing in the mild winter climate of the Channel Islands, plants grew as high as 20 feet (6 m) and, eventually left with just a crown of leaves, were often said to resemble palm trees (Fig. 2). The leaves were also used for human consumption—indeed in soup were a staple diet in the nineteenth century—and for wrapping round butter to keep it cool and clean. The stems, hard and dry, were strong enough for use as rafters. The abundance of the Jersey kale was noted by Pitcairn-Knowles (1906): on leaving the Jersey capital St Hélier "you will behold in almost every farm or garden this useful cabbage plant . . . standing proudly erect, with its tufted top tow-

Fig. 1. Walking sticks made of the stem of the Jersey kale, donated in 1888 by Henry Howell & Co., Cane & Stick Manufacturer (EBC 67314. A. McRobb, RBG, Kew.).

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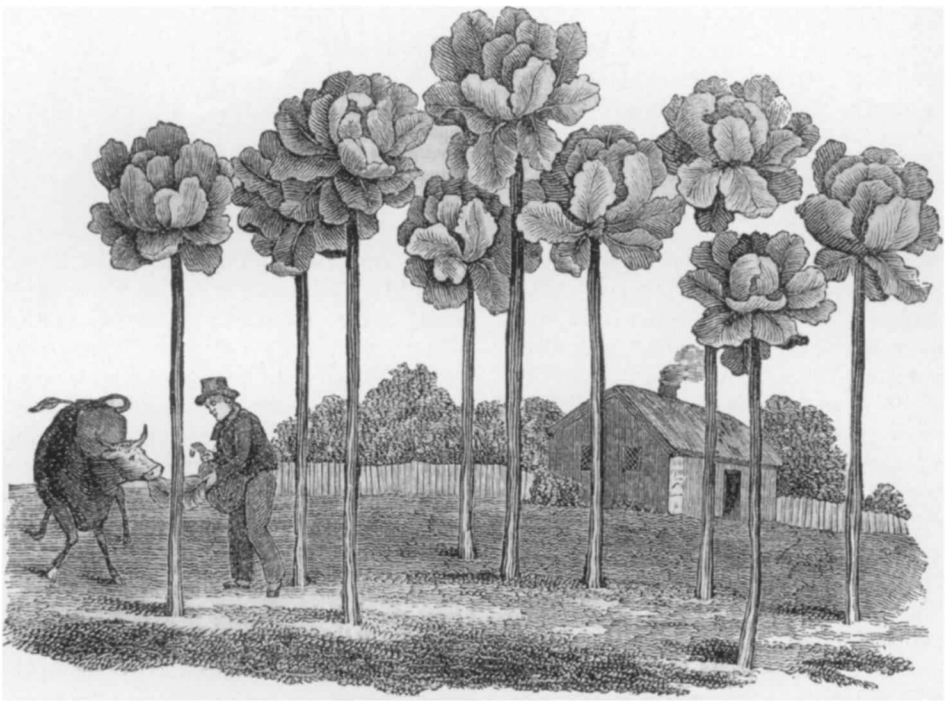

Fig. 2. The Jersey kale in the Channel Islands, depicted in *The Farmer's Magazine* in 1836. A version of this, reproduced in Weaver (1997) as 'Jersey Cow Cabbage from an 1836 woodcut', is virtually the same but the smoke drifts the other way from a steeper-pitched roof and the farmer has a characteristically American, broad-rimmed hat. (By permission of the British Library; A Field of Jersey Cabbages; pp. 2300.)

ering over everything that grows in the fields except the trees. Here you may see a dozen of them sheltering the door of a little hut, there a big cluster grown to supply the cattle with food, and sometimes even a large stretch of land may have been given up to the cultivation of the "choux". Occasionally, too, you may notice them placed in a line along the edge of a garden, forming a picturesque and tidy border and a quaint kind of fence." The author understood that the production of walking sticks had started more than 40 years before.

It was, and is, a laborious process. Stems of the full height were selected in September (Parker and Cox 1974; in March according to Pitcairn-Knowles 1906) and allowed to dry for several months inside. A recent manufacturer would first stack the stems outside in pyramid fashion for four to five weeks, still with the roots attached (L'Etacq Woodcrafts 1985). Bent handles could be obtained either by replanting the cabbages with the root slanting (with this eventually becoming the handle) or by boiling the stems and bending them afterwards. Finally, the sticks were smoothed, varnished and embellished with a ferrule at the base (Parker and Cox 1974).

In their monograph, Parker and Cox (1974) mentioned that "Small clumps of the Cabbage can still be seen in a few gardens in the Channel Islands but the plant no longer occupies the acreage that it did until some twenty or thirty years ago", mainly because livestock was being given alternative food. Furthermore, it "is grown in small quantities in the neighbourhood of St Brieuc, in Brittany, as a cattle fodder." Walking sticks were being produced by L'Etacq Woodcrafts on Jersey, and Grow Ltd. on Guernsey, as recently as the 1980s (L'Etacq Woodcrafts 1985; Webb 1986), but now only one company (Jersey Woodturners) is growing the plants, and manufacturing and exporting the sticks, about a thousand per annum. Demand far outstrips supply. Seeds are still being sold (as "*Brassica oleracea longata*") by specialist growers in the UK and USA but, to judge from the brief descriptions, more for their curiosity, than culinary, appeal. One major UK retailer has commissioned seeds from a Guernsey resident for 2002.

Formal *ex situ* conservation of Jersey kale seeds possibly exists only at *Brassica* germplasm institutes such as Horticultural Research International, Wellesbourne, UK, and the Centre for Genetic Resources, Wageningen, Netherlands (there are no accessions, for example, at the Institut für Pflanzengenetik und Kulturpflanzenforschung, Gatersleben, Germany which has 979 of *B. oleracea* and three of convar. *acephala* var. *viridis*; Institut für Pflanzengenetik und Kulturpflanzenforschung, Gatersleben 2000). Significantly, the original source for both these institutes was L'Etacq Woodcrafts on Jersey. We can well speculate that that, were it not for walking sticks, there would be no formal conservation at all of the Jersey kale, a genetic resource now forgotten for its former value as fodder.

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