

# THE STORY OF PLANTS: STOCK

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ON NEW YEAR'S EVE I was lunching with my friend, the memoirist Theo Nestor. She was in rare form, playfully prognosticating for the group she assembled at her home. Standing on the precipice of 2011, readying for the plunge into the gaping portentous maw of 2012, we were all eager for sooth-saying: real or faked. Theo's predictions sounded like newspaper horoscopes: one friend was to find love in an unusual place; my partner Michael was to have a job change in March. When it came to my prediction she paused long, thought hard, "I see pink stock," she said, "The flower, not anything you can buy on Wall Street."

I had hoped for wealth, fame, adventure. What I got was stock, that addendum to cheap supermarket bouquets lending fragrance to bunches of Asiatic lilies, baby's breath, and leather leaf fern. Why, it's practically the iceberg lettuce of the flower world. And may have you asking, "Why is he writing about stock?" Well, I grow stock. Not in voluminous rows for the cut flower trade but in a little pot on my deck. It delights me, though most gardeners I know grimace at the mention of its name.

Maybe it is this stubby little name, "stock" shortened from "stock gillyflower" which has turned people off to this Mediterranean perennial. There are many gillyflowers: clove gillyflowers or carnations (*Dianthus caryophyllus*), Queen's gillyflower (*Hesperis matronalis*), and wall gillyflower (*Erysimum cheiri*). All are grown for their lovely clove-like fragrance. Actually, the name



*Matthiola incana* cv.

"gillyflower" comes from the French word for clove: *girofle*. In the 16th century the cloves of India were a new and costly spice in the Elizabethan kitchen, so any easily grown flower which mimicked this scent was highly prized. Stock, along with the other gillyflowers, became the darlings of the Elizabethan garden which emphasized fragrance (they were unhygienic times) over color.

The supermarket stocks we know today are hybrids of *Matthiola incana*, one of the most adaptable of the 50 species in the genus which ranges throughout the western Mediterranean Basin and into the mountains of Europe. Sixteenth century stock hybridizers had already

created doubles and a color range which ran from pure white to red. But it was the Victorians who gave us modern stock like the highly fragrant Brompton stock and the quick-growing Ten Weeks stock favored by the floral trade. Though it has a somewhat problematic constitution, stock is still being hybridized and widely grown today.

Where I saw *M. incana* in the wild in Italy it grew to shrub-like proportions feet from the sea, was covered with fragrant flowers, and was accompanied by two other old time garden favorites: dusty miller (*Senecio cineraria*) and alyssum (*Lobularia maritima*). I took this as the clue to growing stock successfully in the Northwest. So I grow it in a pot and tuck it under the eaves with my other exotics, like agaves, during our wet winters, and lose

it regularly. Yet I keep planting stock, and gave up on "hardy" agaves.

Maybe the New Year's prediction of my memoirist friend was a prompt to look back this year instead of forward. Certainly, struck by nostalgia for my father's '60s supper club, I'll have a wedge of iceberg lettuce smothered in Thousand Island dressing now and again. Is it the workings of nostalgia that makes me plant stock? Nostalgia for an era I didn't even garden in? Aren't cloves cheap enough now? Stock will never be a Great Plant Pick, yet I still grow it, even if it makes me nerdier than the nerdiest of the plant nerds. 🌱

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