

THE HISTORY OF *SYMPHYTUM ASPERUM* LEPECH. AND  
*S. × UPLANDICUM* NYMAN IN BRITAIN

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*Symphytum asperum* Lepechin was, according to Aiton (1810) introduced in 1799 by Conrad Loddiges. Loddiges' nursery at Hackney was purchased from Joseph Busch, who had been appointed head gardener at the Palace of St. Petersburg, and who between 1790 and 1801 sent to Conrad Loddiges several species of *Symphytum* including *S. asperum*.\* During the first half of the 19th century *S. asperum* was grown as a fodder plant, but to what degree is difficult to determine owing to confusion with *S. × uplandicum*. As a naturalised plant *S. asperum* is extremely rare and I have been able to confirm only about 20 records extending over 120 years. It is a less persistent species than most comfrees and appears to have died out in most of its recorded localities in Britain.

Tutin (1956) suggests that the introduction of *S. asperum* and its hybridisation with the native *S. officinale* gave rise to *S. × uplandicum* in this country. That such a hybridisation may have taken place in Britain is not disputed; indeed there may be some slight grounds for supposing that *S. × uplandicum* in the Oakford Valley near Bath had such an origin, since *S. asperum* was collected in that locality in 1834 and 1868 by C. C. Babington and T. B. Flower respectively. It seems, however, to have disappeared by 1879. C. Bucknall searched for it without success during 1910-12, but he did find *S. × uplandicum* growing abundantly and hybridising freely with *S. officinale*. Against the view that *S. × uplandicum* arose there as a result of a cross between *S. asperum* and *S. officinale* is the fact that although there is great variation displayed between one colony of *S. × uplandicum* and another none of them shows any variation in the direction of *S. asperum*. So far as my knowledge goes there is no record of *S. × uplandicum* having been found growing in this country in the company of the parent species.

In the Kew Herbarium is a specimen of *S. × uplandicum* collected by Forbes Young at Cobham Lodge, Kent, in 1827, which may have been supplied by Loddiges, and which seems to be the first record of its cultivation in Britain. The earliest record of it as a naturalised plant is in 1861 from Marlborough, Wilts. Earlier records from the Oakford Valley quoted by J. W. White in his *Flora of Bristol* refer to Babington's and Flower's records of *S. asperum*.

Lawrence D. Hills (1954) in dealing with the history of the Russian Comfrey shows that *S. × uplandicum* has been introduced as a forage crop on many occasions during the past 100 years. It was probably also introduced during the first half of the 19th century under the erroneous name of *S. asperrimum*. The cultivation of Comfrey seems to have become very popular from 1870 onwards, when Henry Doubleday of Coggeshall, Essex, imported *S. × uplandicum* from Leningrad (then St. Petersburg). The figure in Curtis' *Botanical Magazine*, plate 6466 (1879) under the name of *S. peregrinum* was drawn from plants presented to Kew in 1875 by Thomas Christy, who was associated with Doubleday in his efforts to popularise its cultivation. Several seedsmen took up the distribution of the

\*The early editions of the catalogues issued by Conrad Loddiges and Sons have not been traced, but the 11th edition of 1818 lists the following: *Symphytum asperrimum*, *S. caeruleum*, *S. coccineum*, *S. patens*, *S. tauricum* and *S. tuberosum*. The first is synonymous with *S. asperum*, of which *S. caeruleum* may have been a variety. *S. coccineum* was presumably the crimson-flowered form of *S. officinale*, and *S. patens* may have been the purple-flowered variety of *S. officinale* or the plant now known as *S. × uplandicum*.

plant, including Messrs. Sutton of Reading, who continued to supply it until 1896. In 1900 Messrs. Webster of Stock, Essex imported it from Russia and they and other nurserymen still carry stocks. These and other introductions from Russia and elsewhere are undoubtedly the chief, if not the sole, origin of *S. × uplandicum* in Britain.

In spite of its hybrid origin *S. × uplandicum* is apparently a fixed hybrid and any variation it shows is due to its back-crossing with *S. officinale* and more rarely, and perhaps less certainly, with *S. asperum*. Populations of *S. × uplandicum* known to me, unless growing in close proximity to *S. officinale*, show remarkable uniformity, and plants grown in Cardiff from seed collected from a large population in Pembrokeshire showed no variation from the parent plants. It was this uniformity and absence of segregation which led the late C. Bucknall and others to consider it a good species.

The present known vice-comital distribution is 1-4, 6-9, 11-14, 16, 17, 19-24, 28-30, 32-37, 40-52, 54, 55, 57-59, 61-64, 67, 69-71, 73, 77, 78, 82-85, 88-90, 92, 93, 95, 96, 101, 105, 111, 112. H. 1, 2, 7, 12-16, 18-21, 23, 25, 27-30, 33-40. C.

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