

# WILLIAM HUGH CURTIS BIOGRAPHY

Chuck Staples, CSSA Historian

**William Hugh Curtis (1746–1799)—founder of the long-running The (Curtis's {after his death}) Botanical Magazine that included, among many plant species, images of cactus and other succulent plants.**



Born in Alton, Hampshire, England on 11 January 1746—the son of a Quaker tanner by trade—William Hugh Curtis became an apothecary, botanist, entomologist, naturalist, nurseryman and horticulturist. Early in life he was for a short time an apothecary, having been apprenticed to his grandfather, the town surgeon/apothecary. However, due to his interest in flora he turned his attention to horticulture by developing his own public garden and publishing botanical pamphlets. He was Praefectus Horti of Chelsea Physic Garden 1772–1777 — founder of botanical garden at Higler's Lane, Lower Marsh, Lambeth 1777 — owner of nursery at Queen's Elm, Brompton 1789-1811 and at Sloane Street, Chelsea 1812–1823 — all in England.

By 1787 Curtis founded the popular 'The Botanical Magazine' (Curtis's Botanical Magazine after his death), as both an illustrated gardening and botanical journal, that included full-page and hand-colored plate illustrations of beautiful and interesting flowering plants from new discoveries around the world that included cactus and other succulent plants. A brief description was given for each plant including some history, growth characteristics and maybe a common names for the species. This magazine continued publication on a somewhat quarterly basis for nearly two centuries until it was integrated within the 'Kew Magazine' from 1984 to 1994. In 1995 the name reverted back to 'Curtis's Botanical Magazine' but continued to be published by the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, England.

Editors of 'The Curtis's Botanical Magazine' were:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Years Editor</u>	<u>Vols</u>	<u>Plates</u>
William Curtis	1787–1799	1–13	468
John Sims	1800–1826	14–53	2,235
William J Hooker	1827–1865	54–90	2,720
Joseph D Hooker	1866–1904	91–130	2,505
William T Thiselton-Dyer	1905–1906	131–132	119
David Prain	1907–1920	133–146	761
John Ramsbottom	1921	147	59
Otto Stapf	1922–1933	148–156	402
Arthur W Hill	1934–1940	157–163	307
AD Cotton	1941–1948	164	43
William B Turrill	1949–1962	165–173	395
George Taylor	1963–1970	174–178	197
David R Hunt	1971–1983	179–	

By 1971 illustrations were in excess of 10,000 colored plates.

There were many artists who contributed their artistic talents to this publication. Initially the art works were hand-colored prints taken from copper engraving plates for the first 30 volumes. Some of the artists were:

James Sowerby (1757–1822) from England—70 plates between 1787–1790.

Sydenham Teast Edwards (1768–1819) from Wales—1,700 watercolor plates between 1787–1815.

Walter Hood Fitch (1817–1892) from Scotland—2,700 plates between 1834–1877.

Harriet Ann [née Hooker] Thiselton-Dyer (1854–1945) {daughter of JD Hooker} from England—90 plates 1878–1906.

Matilda Smith (1854–1926) {cousin of Harriet Ann Thiselton-Dyer} from England—2,300+ plates between 1878–1923.

Lilian Snelling (1879–1972) from England—830 plates 1921–1948.

Curtis described two Pelargoniums: *P. echinatum* from Northern Cape in 1795 and *P. reniforme* from Eastern Cape, South Africa in 1800.

William Hugh Curtis died on 7 July 1799.

## References:

Mitich LW. 1994. The Elephant's Foot. *Cact Succ J (US)* 66: 190.

Rowley GD. 1997. *A History of Succulent Plants (Succulentist Biofile)*. 228–231, 362.

Welham MJ. 2013. William Curtis and Curtis Botanical Magazine. *The Amateurs' Digest* 25 (3): 9.

Staples CJ. 2013. *A Historical Record of Authors of C&S Plant Names & Books for the Amateur Hobbyist*. Vol 1: 167.

Welham MJ. 2016. Little Bits of People Histories by Chuck Staples. *The Amateurs' Digest* 28 (6): 7.