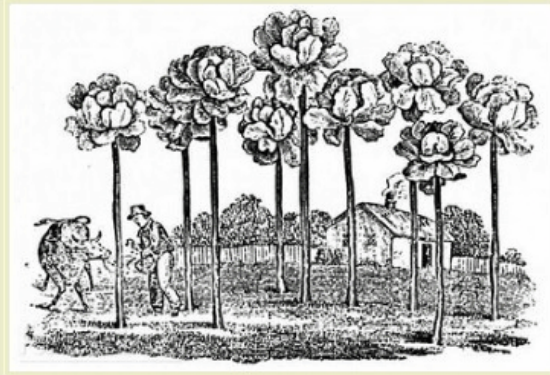


FRIDAY, JANUARY 13, 2012

The Cabbage that is King: *Brassica oleracea longata*



Or, the curious case of the seven-foot tall cabbage, which brought two seedsellers and one Reverend Laycock of Hampshire into Westminster County Court in 1898. The sellers of seed were seeking to collect £24 from the good Reverend for cabbage seeds with which they had supplied him; he was countersuing because the resulting plants were, well, not as described.

He had a full 200 acres—20,000 plants in all—of strange, tree-like stalks with cabbage heads waving like leafy nests at the top. One can only imagine his consternation as the plants shot past normal cabbage height to three feet tall, then four, five, six and "grew on until [they were] seven feet above the ground".

At this description disbelieving laughter ensued in court, until Rev. Laycock produced Exhibit A: a cabbage that was in fact "seven feet from the root", about 4ft of which was "stout bare stump, then a cluster of leaves from which several shoots ascended".

This is the sort of courtroom drama that you rarely see on Law and Order. "Your honor, I would like to submit as evidence this gigantic cabbage."

Cue the expert witness, a horticulturist who identified the beast as *Brassica oleracea longata*. Tree cabbage or giant cow cabbage or long-jacks or Jersey Kale is found on the Channel Islands, where it has historically been grown for, wait for it...walking sticks.

Kew's Economic Botany Collection contains several of them, described as large, lightweight, and highly varnished, a product which was exported from the islands in annual quantities of as many as 30,000 in 1906, when "one could behold in almost every farm or garden this useful cabbage plant..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...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 production of walking sticks had started on the islands more than 40 years previously. To yield a strong, straight stem the lower leaves were stripped off as the plant grew, providing food for the table, wrappings for butter and cheese, and an excellent and now forgotten fodder for sheep or cattle.



Philip Miller's *Gardener's Dictionary* of 1835 asserts not only that the plant can grow up to sixteen feet tall (other sources list eighteen and even twenty feet), but also that sixty plants would provide sufficient fodder for a cow for an entire year, and that it lasted four years without fresh planting since only the side leaves were used. Sheep fed upon the walking stick cabbages were said to produce wool of the finest silken texture up to 25 inches long.

Cabbage stems were also used for roofing small buildings by the islanders, but their most lucrative transformation was into the walking sticks. After several months (years? accounts differ) drying of the stems with the roots still attached, the sticks were smoothed, varnished, embellished and sold to tourists for a shilling.

They'll set you back more than that, £37 now, from Philip and Jacquelyn Johnson, the last makers and purveyors of cabbage walking sticks on the Islands, who were featured on the BBC's *Countryfile* in an episode on Jersey broadcast in 2010 (the link is to the full episode; go to 8:50 to see the cabbages).



Our Reverend Laycock, though, remained undeterred by any new economic potential for his strange crop. Accompanied by more courtroom laughter, he asserted that he had desired cabbages, not walking sticks! The judge fined the seedsellers £21 for breach of contract.



Sources:

--I first learned of the 'walking stick cabbage' in D.G. Hessayon's *Armchair Book of the Garden*, Transworld Publishers, London, 1983, p. 186.

--The tale of the court case, and the first image is from an article by Paul Chambers in the *Forfean Times*, which references *The Daily Graphic*, 26 April 1898. It is also listed as being printed in *The Farmer's Magazine* in 1836. The image also serves as the frontispiece of the book *The Giant Cabbage of the Channel Islands*, a Guernsey historical monograph from 1974 by Southcombe Parker published by Toucan Press. I love that there is an entire book on giant cabbages and can't wait for my copy to arrive in the mail.

--An excellent 'plant portrait' of the walking stick cabbage, from which the 1906 quotes are taken, is available from Kew as originally published in *Economic Botany* 54(2) pp. 141-143, 2000.

--Advice on growing walking stick cabbage can be found [here](#) and [here](#). A recent report on growing (and cooking) it is [here](#).

--Seeds may be ordered from any number of online purveyors.