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Rowland H. Biffen  
Frontmatter  
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### **The Auricula**

The plant geneticist Sir Rowland Biffen (1874–1949), who is best remembered for his work on the improvement of English wheat varieties using Mendelian principles, was also a keen botanist and gardener. This short work on the auricula, published posthumously in 1951, contains a full botanical account of the species, but also a social history of this most popular of 'florist's flowers'. Probably introduced to England by refugees from the continent in the late sixteenth century, the auricula, though delicate-looking, is extremely hardy, can be grown in pots, and hybridizes freely, and so it was an ideal plant for competitive growers, especially in the north of England, who in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries vied with each other to breed ever more spectacular varieties, while adhering to strict guidelines on form and proportion. This work, illustrated with seven black-and-white plates, will be of interest to botanists and garden historians alike.

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THE STORY OF A  
*Florist's Flower*



BY  
ROWLAND H. BIFFEN, F.R.S.

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## FOREWORD

SIR ROWLAND BIFFEN completed the manuscript of this book shortly before he died in July 1949 at the age of 75, but he was too ill to give it a final revision. The Cambridge University Press consequently asked me to do this and to correct the proofs. Fortunately, Sir Rowland had often discussed the contents of the book with me, and I had had frequent opportunities of seeing his fine collection of Auriculas, including those he had bred himself. On the other hand, I have no special knowledge of these plants. The Plates are photographs, taken in 1949 under the author's supervision, of some of the most interesting Auriculas in his collection.

From boyhood days at Cheltenham Sir Rowland Biffen was a keen gardener, and he rapidly acquired an amazing knowledge of garden plants. During his early career at Cambridge he was one of the pioneers of Mendelian experimentation, and he subsequently became famous as a breeder of new wheat varieties. Little Joss and Yeoman wheats, however, were only one aspect of a remarkable flair for plant breeding in general: in his private garden, and constantly assisted by his wife, new kinds of peas, strawberries, Delphiniums, Gladioli, sweet peas and other ornamental plants were produced, but, above all, Auriculas were his chief and most constant love. Early in his career as an Auricula fancier he became intrigued by the

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Edged types, and he set himself the task of trying to elucidate their nature and origin. Biffen most happily combined genetics and plant breeding in his techniques, and his perception as an artist of no mean skill also contributed to the creation of flowers of outstanding beauty.

Just before he died Sir Rowland sent some of his choicest Auriculas to the Nurseries, Bartley, Southampton (Mr C. G. Haysom) in the hope that they would be used for further breeding. Others found a home at the Cambridge Botanic Garden, where they will be maintained.

At the end of the book I have included a list of additional references, especially to modern investigations on the Garden Auricula and on the species of *Primula* from which it has been derived or to which it is closely related.

I am much indebted to the following for assistance in the revision of the manuscript: Mr W. T. Stearn (Lindley Librarian, Royal Horticultural Society), Dr W. B. Turrill (Keeper of the Kew Herbarium), Mr G. Fox Wilson (Royal Horticultural Society's Garden), Dr D. G. Catcheside, Sir William Wright Smith, Mr C. G. Haysom, and Mr R. H. Briggs (Secretary of the Northern Section of the National Auricula and *Primula* Society).

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## PLATES

*The plates are bound together at the end of the book*

- I. Crimson and white striping. The flower is a Self, and the white stripes are due to meal.
- II. Scarlet, yellow and white striping on a Self flower.
- III. Grey Edge with a well defined silver margin and a poor, granulated paste.
- IV. Green Edge, with no trace of meal. *Ex* Virescent cross.
- V. A silvery Grey Edge with only a trace of meal. *Ex* Virescent cross.
- VI. Grey Edge without a distinct silvery margin. Body colour vandyke brown to gold. *Ex* Virescent cross.
- VII. Willow green Grey Edge, body colour crimson purple. Grown in an open border, and the flowers thinned down to about half their original number. *Ex* Virescent cross.

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## PREFACE

SOME THIRTY YEARS AGO I started an investigation to determine what happened when an Alpine was crossed with a Green Edged Auricula. It was carried on to the third hybrid generation, and by then a large collection of plants had accumulated which anyone with the instincts of a florist would unhesitatingly describe as rubbish. This rubbish, however, was so full of interest and in some cases so difficult to account for on the generally accepted principles of heredity that it led me to attempt to make a more comprehensive study of the Auricula. In this the somewhat limited point of view of the florist became a secondary one, and problems involving the origin of the various groups of the Auricula now in cultivation became the primary one. Concurrently some problems of cultivation, soon to be abandoned on account of experimental difficulties and the impossibility of growing sufficiently large numbers of plants for the purpose, were enquired into. By 1939 the investigations were well under way and several matters on which I could find no information anywhere were more or less satisfactorily cleared up, whilst others seemed to be on the way towards a solution. Then the difficulties of carrying on work of this nature with inadequate and inefficient garden help necessitated concentration on the more essential points, with the result that here

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and there general impressions rather than conclusive statements can alone be given. Whether they should have been given may be an open question, but the overriding consideration was that, if they were not stated, no opportunity for carrying the investigations further might be available. Furthermore, it may be all to the good to give these views, for some other investigator may be tempted to enquire further into these matters and provide additional information on the parts played by chance and by the efforts of thousands of unknown florists in building up this unique type of plant.

One other consideration has influenced me in making the attempt to piece together the life story of the Auricula. It has been strangely neglected and at only one time in its long history, namely between about 1800 and 1830, were any books published which deal especially with the plant. These were concerned almost entirely with its cultivation, and only fragmentary accounts of other aspects of the subject are to be found in works which are often difficult of access. This field has only partially been explored and there is a possibility that further information is to be found in the horticultural literature of France and Germany. But the story has proved to be more complete than might have been expected and I hope that it may be of interest to those who have fallen under the spell of this curiously fascinating plant.

CAMBRIDGE

*May 1949*

R. H. BIFFEN