The first, well-documented man-made hybrid was a *Dianthus*, produced in 1716, when Thomas Fairchild crossed *Dianthus caryophyllus* (Carnation) with *D. barbatus* (Sweet William). While that may seem innocent enough these days, it was rather controversial at the time, since it was believed that only an all-powerful creator could perform such miracles. Indeed, Fairchild, himself devoutly religious, had great concerns about his achievement. Fortunately, the Royal Society recognized the significance of his accomplishment. This drive to produce new and unusual plants has its origin in human desires for things that have improved characteristics, or are simply different.

Of course, plants have been hybridizing naturally for far longer than humans have been around to worry about or appreciate them. Natural hybrids occur in many genera, and may even be one mechanism through which new species evolve.

Many people (often associated with the term ‘Purist’) really do not like hybrids at all, concentrating their interest and collections instead on pure species. Before they consign this issue of the Journal to the ‘less interesting’ pile of literature, it should be pointed out that many cultivars are pure species, just outstanding examples of them. Purists, please stay with us!

Cultivars are nothing new. *Agave murpheyi*, used by the Hohokam Indians as a source of food and fibre, is closely associated with the sites of old settlements in southern Arizona and northern Sonora. It appears to have undergone some selection by its human cultivators. Of course, modern humans have continued the relationship with *Agave* in the production of varieties that are specifically used in the production of tequila and other beverages. One way or another, you have to like cultivars!

So, humans have a tendency to go around and encourage the presence of things they like, and put them where they can see or use them. Our collections and gardens are good examples of this, and we try to further increase our enjoyment of them by including outstanding specimens, many of which are cultivars or hybrids.

**Definitions & conventions**

Cultivars, whether hybrids or selections from natural populations, arise due to intentional human activity. This is a convenient way to define them. A cultivar is not a single plant, but a group of plants whose characters are uniform, stable and distinct from others. Furthermore, they have to be stable when propagated by appropriate means. There is no requirement for a cultivar to be propagated by clonal methods. If a seedling from a cultivar has the characteristics of its parent, then it is that cultivar. Similarly, if a newly-produced seedling looks like an existing cultivar, it is regarded as being that cultivar, regardless of genetic differences.

A hybrid usually refers to the progeny of a cross between two natural species, though it can also be applied to plants resulting from the cross of plants from two separate populations which do not usually interbreed and display a distinct phenotype. The symbol × is be used to denote a hybrid—literally a cross—and can be used to indicate parentage, e.g. *Aloe*...