
‘Vegetables varied and excellent, chiefly from a Celestial garden.’¹

Michael Williams

It is well known that for many generations gardeners of Chinese origin dominated the growing of vegetables in Australia. Some have even considered European Australians might have died of scurvy were it not for the Chinese contribution to this essential part of everyone’s diet. This is somewhat of an exaggeration, Chinese market gardeners were only 60% of vegetable growers at their highest proportion, while less than 50% of Chinese Australians worked as markets gardeners. In other words, more than 40% of markets gardeners were not Chinese and 60% of Chinese Australians worked at something else. Nevertheless, this is a fine contribution and one that is strongly reflected in the many rural agricultural shows that from the late nineteenth century began to offer prizes for the best grown vegetables in various categories. Around the circuit of these rural shows growers of Chinese heritage were prominent, as were the vegetables with which they collected so many prizes. Yet the reception afforded these significant growers of vegetables is reflective of the racist Australia of the period, an Australia that was then so anxious to mould itself into a ‘white’ Australia.

The effort by those attending agricultural shows, or at least those reporting such shows, to see themselves and their society as ‘white’ is most glaringly seen in names, or rather lack of names. In account after account prizes are announced as having been won or vegetables grown by ‘a Chinese’, ‘the Chinese’, ‘Chinaman’, ‘John’ or even on occasion ‘a Celestial’. Such lack of individuality and ethnic labelling is presented side by side with their competitors of European origin for the same vegetable prizes, who are not only invariably named but more often than not granted the title ‘Mr’.

This lack of individualism, the casual sweeping of all men of a non-white background into one ethnic ‘vegetable class’ was not however accompanied by any hesitation to accept the quality of their vegetables. On the contrary the vegetables themselves are highly praised just as their growers, with a few exceptions, are rarely given the courtesy of being named. One of the earliest examples comes from the 1872 Hamilton Agricultural Show where we are told that ‘John Chinaman had some splendid cabbages. John’s celery,

also, was a good exhibit.’² Yet while common this treatment was by no means universal and in fact just a few years later at the same Hamilton Agricultural Show in 1874 we have the two main competitors named, even if somewhat patronisingly for Ah Yuk:

Vegetables were not numerously represented, but what there were of them were fine, Mr. J. Wiggins and Ah Yuk, the Chinaman, dividing the honours between them. The latter took seven prizes of £1 each for vegetables and fruit, and John, who now grows articles specially for exhibition, has been heard to say, “Aglicultul Show welly good — me sabbee.”³

This individualism, such as it was, did not last, and in 1881, again at Hamilton, we have it reported that: ‘Onions, too, were remarkably good, and in this class, as in most of the other vegetables, the Chinamen from Hamilton, Penshurst and Coleraine managed to divide the honors with Mr. Wiggins.’⁴ ‘The Chinamen’ provided in 1883 similar competition at the neighbouring Coleraine Agriculture Show: ‘The show of vegetables and fruits was excellent, surpassing anything seen here before. J. Wiggins, of Hamilton was a large prizetaker; also Messrs. Worthy, Templeton, Taylor, Cameron and the Chinamen.’⁵

Over in the North Gippsland Agricultural, Pastoral, and Horticultural Society Show of 1877 the winner found himself described only as ‘an irritable little Chinaman’.⁶ While at the 1882 Crookwell Agriculture Show only second prize was found worthy of a name: ‘The prize for best collection of vegetables fell to a celestial, and contained a deal of merit. Mr. Grunsell exhibited a collection of vegetables, and secured second prize.’⁷

This inability or unwillingness to see non-white vegetable growers as individuals did not prevent the idea of ‘the Chinese vegetable grower’ being held up as the standard for all other vegetable growers. At the Gawler Agriculture Show of 1883 for example: ‘The exhibits of vegetables in respect to number were not creditable to the District of Barossa, and the inhabitants would do well to get a few Chinese on their rich-soiled river banks to show them “how it is done.”’⁸ In fact, this acknowledged superiority of vegetables led

to the Wollongong Show organisers in the same year demanding that 'all fruit and vegetables must be grown by the exhibitors'. 'The reason for the proposed alteration was on account of some vegetables grown by Chinamen having been exhibited at the late show by certain other parties as their own.'⁹

The Northern (Tasmania) Horticultural Show of 1890 did not have any trouble naming one of Launceston's leading citizens: 'The vegetable classes proved very good, considering the time of the year, and a Chinaman named Chung Gon was the most successful exhibitor for the best collection of vegetables.'¹⁰

Though this show is notable in having its vegetable competition divided into: 'Open to All' and 'Amateurs Only'. Whether or not this division had anything to do with dividing off 'professional' market gardeners like Chung Gon is unclear. But in the same year the Berridale Pastoral and Agricultural Association made their intentions very clear when: 'A motion was proposed and carried that Chinese be not allowed to become members of the Association, nor to compete at the above.'¹¹ 'This is simply the outcome of prejudice'¹² was how opposition to the motion at the time expressed the obvious.

By the end of the nineteenth century, perhaps as some local market gardeners had gradually become a fixture of their communities, more naming of individuals is to be found. Not at the Bathurst Agricultural Show of 1894, however, where a 'George Trevitt and Chinese gardeners took most of the prizes.'¹³ But certainly at the Burra Show in 1895 where Ah Chin won for a 'collection salad vegetables, not less than five varieties, 5s each exhibit'.¹⁴ While at the Bundaberg Agricultural and Pastoral Society show that same year: 'Mah Wah and Cheng Bing, as in the past, divided the prize money about equally.'¹⁵ Despite or because of being a 'hitherto almost invincible market gardener Mah Wah' seems to have inspired some hostility with the following year his win being depicted as: 'This district has been so long accustomed to the Mongolian sweeping the prize board with his "cabbiege," &c.'¹⁶

The Horsham Amateur Rose and Horticultural Show and Bazaar displayed a rare lack of disrespect in its report of 1898: 'The vegetable prizes, with two exceptions (Mr. F. Anhwin for broad beans, and Mr. Leslie Smith for rhubarb), were carried off by Hop Wah, a Chinese gardener, who showed a splendid collection, in which were included all the vegetables in season.'¹⁷ Not so the Dubbo Agricultural Show early in the new century when in 1902 only fruit growers were named: 'In vegetables, most of the prizes were secured by Chinese gardeners. In fruits, Reinhard Bros, and A. Wurfel were the principal prizetakers.'¹⁸ Though a few



Chinese market gardener on 'Toorale' with a cauliflower – Bourke, NSW, c.1930 [Courtesy State Library of New South Wales]

years later, in 1905, individuals are named even if their win seems a disappointment: 'The great bulk of the prizes, however, fell to the Chinese gardeners Hap Lee and Mow Hee.'¹⁹ The Dubbo Show of 1907 is even plainer in its 'us versus them' attitude: 'For Jerusalem artichokes Mr. T.M. Scott and C.Q. Fitzhardinge were the white competitors against the local Chinese gardeners. Mr. John Fitzsimmons showed a collection of tomatoes in competition with Mow Hee and Quong

Lee.' Though it seems a separate competition was also set up, as 'Mow Hee and Quong Lee entered for the market gardeners' prize.'²⁰

By the twentieth century the White Australia Policy was official with the new Commonwealth Government's Dictation Test in full force and attitudes to non-white's hardening.²¹ Nevertheless, the standard remained as this report of the Sutton Forest exhibit at the Royal Agricultural Show in 1909 attested: 'the pumpkins, scarlet runners, and broad beans are good enough to brighten the eye and gladden the heart of the most pessimistic Celestial.'²² The strain of the effort to balance a rejection of Chinese people while appreciating their vegetables, and in this case their conduct, is most apparent in the Molong Show of 1911:

A WHITE MAN "CHINAMAN."

Molong has a Chinese Gardener the color of whose skin is the only thing that prevents him from being a real white Australian. At the Molong show yesterday he won the prize of £1 1s, for collection of vegetables, and he not only donated the prize money to the hospital, but also the vegetables, which were worth about thirty shillings.²³

The White Australia Policy had its impact and the numbers of Chinese people in Australia declined in the first half of the twentieth century. Despite this, the high standards they had set long continued as reported in the Horsham Agricultural Show of 1930: 'The vegetables made a fine display, and this section was becoming very popular, judging by the extra entries. The exhibits in this section would have done credit to a Chinese gardener.'²⁴

About the Author

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References

- ¹ *The Areas' Express*, 13 October 1883, p. 2, Georgetown Agricultural Show 1883. 'Celestial' was a common label for people from China in the nineteenth century based upon the Chinese Emperor's title 'Son of Heaven'.
- ² *The Australasian*, 16 March 1872, p. 26, from the *Hamilton Spectator*.
- ³ *Hamilton Spectator*, 28 February 1874, p. 4.
- ⁴ *Leader*, 19 March 1881, p. 9, from the *Hamilton Spectator*.
- ⁵ *Leader*, 24 March 1883, p. 11.
- ⁶ *Gippsland Times*, 23 April 1877, p. 4.
- ⁷ *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*, 28 March 1882, p. 4.
- ⁸ *Adelaide Observer*, 8 September 1883, p. 31.
- ⁹ *The Kiama Independent, and Shoalhaven Advertiser*, 8 May 1883, p. 4.
- ¹⁰ *Daily Telegraph* (Launceston), 28 February 1890, p. 3. See 'Chungon Crescent, Launceston, Tasmania', *Chinese Australian History in 88 Objects*, <<https://chinozhistory.org/index.php/58-chungon-crescent-launceston-tasmania/>>, accessed 30 August 2022.
- ¹¹ *The Manaro Mercury, and Cooma and Bombala Advertiser*, 7 May 1892, p. 8.
- ¹² *The Manaro Mercury, and Cooma and Bombala Advertiser*, 17 May 1892, p. 3.
- ¹³ *The Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, 21 April 1894, p. 787.
- ¹⁴ *Burra Record*, 25 September 1895, p. 3.
- ¹⁵ *The Bundaberg Mail and Burnett Advertiser*, 19 July 1895, p. 3.
- ¹⁶ *The Bundaberg Mail and Burnett Advertiser*, 28 August 1896, p. 3. 'Mongolian' being a somewhat more disrespectful labelling of people from China than the perhaps jocular 'Celestial'.
- ¹⁷ *The Horsham Times*, 28 October 1898, p. 2.
- ¹⁸ *The Daily Telegraph*, 1 May 1902, p. 7.
- ¹⁹ *The Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate*, 6 May 1905, p. 2.
- ²⁰ *The Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate*, 4 May 1907, p. 3.
- ²¹ The Dictation Test was a fake test under which 'undesirables' aka non-white people could be excluded from Australia without citing 'race' openly. See 'Dictation Test – Estonian', *Chinese Australian History in 88 Objects*, <<https://chinozhistory.org/index.php/40-the-dictation-test/>>, accessed 30 August 2022.
- ²² *The Scrutineer and Berrima District Press*, 10 April 1909, p. 3.
- ²³ *Leader*, 23 March 1911, p. 2.
- ²⁴ *The Horsham Times*, 3 October 1930, p. 2.