HYBRIDS

I have just learned that I am 2.9% Neanderthal and 97.1% homo sapiens (Marlène thinks it is the other way round). Apart from people from Africa, the human race is between 1 and 4 percent Neanderthal, the rest being homo sapiens, so I am more Neanderthal than average. Apparently the two types of human co-existed for a few thousand years in Europe and Western Asia and interbred, with the more-numerous homo sapiens contributing most to the gene pool. So I am a hybrid. I don't mind being part-Neanderthal, after all they were bigger, stronger and had bigger brains, so that's not so bad. Also, in more recent times the boffins have managed to determine, through DNA analysis, that the English have 60 to 80% of their DNA from the Ancient Brits who built Stonehenge 5,000 years ago, the other 20 to 40% coming from later immigrants of various types. I have been tested and I am 72% Ancient Brit and 28% North-West European, so I am a hybrid again.

With plants, the breeders have for thousands of years been improving varieties by hybridisation, crossing one variety with another to secure a new plant having superior qualities. On my allotment as an example, I benefit from the Josta, a very vigorous cross between a gooseberry and a blackcurrant which produces abundant crops of large, delicious blackcurrants from bushes which are immune to the dreaded big bud disease of blackcurrants. A glance at vegetable seed catalogues shows how breeders are introducing new, improved varieties every year. A seed catalogue is an Ali Baba's cave of the wonders of plant breeding.

But the boffins are doing more than that. In test tubes and with modern gene-splicing techniques, ie gene therapy, they are introducing new genes into human embryos to avoid some inherited genetic diseases being passed down from generation to generation, and I feel sure few people would argue with that. In other research the boffins are allowed to experiment with human embryos up to a certain stage in the embryo's development (15 days) – and no further, and they are up to 14 days already and clamouring for more. I feel sure that the temptation is there to implant the modified embryo into a surrogate mother in order to produce a hybridised human with superior characteristics. The mind boggles at the possibilities.

Recent news from California is interesting. They have modified pig embryos using gene therapy so that they produce a human pancreas (using stem cells from a patient needing a new pancreas). Thus the little piggies running around will be part-human, part-pig, ie hybrids. This may be a most important development in the cause of saving human lives, but it does show the eagerness of the boffins in this aspect of hybridisation.

Queen Victoria, on being told that she was descended from a monkey (despite her well-recorded family tree) is reported to have been "not amused". She would have been even less amused had she been told that she was part-Neanderthal. She might have been apoplectic on being told that she shared 57% of her genes with a cabbage. I wonder whether Prince Albert used the French term of endearment "Bonjour Mon Chou" (hello my little cabbage)!

Now, seeing that our genetic makeup is so close to that of a cabbage and other vegetables (we share 75% of our DNA with the pumpkin), perhaps other boffins have been splicing our DNA with that of vegetables to produce humans with superior characteristics. Perhaps they have already succeeded. On my allotment I grow a superb variety of cylindrical beetroot called "Forono" which can weigh 1 to 2 pounds and sits tall on the soil with just one or two really tiny roots. It seems on the point of finally detaching itself from the soil and going for a walk like a human. One can imagine a human hybridised with that beetroot with a tremendous gift, say, for composing and playing music. He might be named Beet-hoven. His cousin, hybridised this time with a potato, might be less gifted musically, play the tuber in the orchestra and be called "Tubby". Other hybridised humans, this time with the cabbage family, might play alongside the tuber player in the brassica section. As for vocalists, if there were no home-grown singers, cauliflowers wanting to splice their DNA to produce a superior singer could wave their florets suggestively to attract the Bee Gees or even the odd beetle. The artists could tour the world as the "Allotment Symphony Orchestra" and make a fortune.

On my allotment I take an immense pleasure in my two straight rows of leeks standing shoulder to shoulder, almost pure white and wearing smart green clothes. That makes me think of hybridisations that may have already taken place between humans and leeks, in Korea for example. The resultant hominid could then have had tens of thousands of tiny pieces of skin removed for growing on in the laboratory then implanted into embryos then via tens of thousands of surrogate mothers to produce an army of completely identical soldiers, goose-stepping with remarkable precision across a vast square past a rostrum, shouting with one voice their allegiance to their Great Leader, or perhaps Great Leeker. One sees them on TV, so perhaps the hybridisation of man and leek, together with subsequent cloning, has indeed taken place. How else can they manage such precision?

Has hybridisation between Man and vegetable already taken place? Is it a state secret and you will be the last to know? Next time you take a walk down the High Street, just take a look at passers-by and assess him or her. Does he, with imposing bearing and a large tummy, look like a Kind Edward potato hybrid? Does she, with hair in blonde tassels, look like a sweet corn hybrid? Does he over there, slim and Latino, look like a French bean hybrid? Does she, red with the sun and round as an apple, look like a tomato hybrid? The possibilities are endless. To test whether such hybridisation has been taking place with only you in the dark, you could ask King Edward whether one of his parents was a potato. He might very well reply "Yes".

New studies indicate that plants should be accorded the status of autonomous beings, because they can learn, remember, and change their behaviour as a result. They **do** have intelligence. Perhaps it is just a matter of time before we are obliged to stun potatoes before peeling them! So from now on, when visiting my allotment, I shall view my DNA cousins with new respect. I shall go down the line of cabbages, greeting them with "Bonjour Mon Chou", "Bonjour Mon Chou". I shall regard them all as really close friends, defending them from Muntjac deer, badgers, pigeons, slugs, snails, cabbage-white butterflies, aphids and their ilk. However, when eating them I will now have mixed feelings – eating my cousins! I may feel like a cannibal…….. but I am hungry so needs must!

Bon appétit!

MIKE MASON