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GROWING HISTORY

Endangered plants find a future with Plant Heritage

Today, in celebration of Plant Conservation Day, charity Plant Heritage is showcasing four recent conservation successes achieved by our National Plant Collection holders and members of the charity. Without the skilful intervention of these dedicated individuals, these plants would have faced extinction and their history and genetic material would have been lost forever.

Our four refugees are *Euphorbia stygiana*, a rare plant native to the Azores, and four garden plants which represent potent fragments of our cultural history: *Pelargonium* 'Pride of Exmouth', *Dianthus* 'Souvenir de la Malmaison', *Aster novi-belgii* 'Beauty of Colwall' and *Tulipa* 'Captain Fryatt'.

Plant Conservation Day is an international celebration which publicises the work of botanic gardens around the world in preserving, protecting, and conserving plants for people and the planet.

Euphorbia stygiana is a hardy shrub native to the Azores which exists in the wild in only 10 locations. Failure to regenerate in its natural habitat and difficulty growing it in gardens meant that action was needed if this handsome plant was not to become extinct.

In response, the National Plant Collection holder of hardy *Euphorbia*, the Oxford Botanic Garden, tasked a team of four to carry out on a *ex situ* programme – that is conserving the endangered species “in captivity”, rather than in its native habitat.

After several years of research, the plant can now be propagated successfully and is no longer endangered.



Captain Charles Algernon Fryatt (1872-1916) was a merchant mariner and master of the unarmed SS Brussels. During WW1 the SS Brussels evacuated Allied troops from France, evading German U-boats in many daring skirmishes. However, in 1916, the ship was boarded by the Germans and Captain Fryatt was taken prisoner. For his audacity in rescuing Allied troops and ramming a U-boat, he was court martialled, and to the outrage of the world, executed by his captors.



In 1931, the Netherlands bulb firm, Van Tubergen, raised *Tulipa* 'Captain Fryatt' in his memory, but despite the beauty of the tulip, it fell out of cultivation in the 1990s. Now it is only known to exist in National Plant Collection of Tulipa in Cambridge University Botanic Garden, where a descendent of the Captain, Stephen

Fryatt has brought its story to light and recalled an evocative piece of our social history.

Pelargonium 'Pride of Exmouth', a zonal pelargonium, was raised by Mrs. A. Hitchen of 103 Salterton Road, Exmouth. It was first exhibited, as a novel variety, by the Surrey Pelargonium Society at the Royal Botanic Garden, Kew, in June 1926 at which it was awarded a Reserve Medal. Mrs Hitchen clearly wanted to maintain her plant's association with its birthplace and the title deeds of 103 Salterton Road state that: "The vendor requests that six plants in good condition be given freely and in perpetuity to each succeeding title holder in order that the species be preserved". But she could not foresee that the house might remain empty for months.

The new owners found one very tall, single-stemmed and straggly plant in bone dry compost, labeled, on a window sill. Local Plant Heritage member, Roger Stuckey, successfully took cuttings and now there are sufficient plants to ensure the variety's survival.

The original ***Dianthus 'Souvenir de la Malmaison'*** (Old Blush) first came to Great Britain from France in the early 1860s. By the end of that century up to 20 clove-scented Malmaison cultivars had been developed which were popular with the aristocracy in the Edwardian period. However, in subsequent decades the flowers fell out of favour, despite their beauty and luscious fragrance and further suffered a debilitating virus.



The latest micro-propagation techniques have allowed Jim Marshall, National Plant Collection holder of *Dianthus*, to produce disease-free. Today, thanks to Jim's conservation work, five of the original varieties are available in Britain to be enjoyed by us all.

Jim will be recreating a spectacular Edwardian display of his beautiful Malmaisons in the Plant Heritage Marquee at Hampton Court Flower Show in July.

Aster novi-belgii 'Beauty of Colwall' was one of the first modern asters bred by legendary plant breeder Ernest Ballard. In 1907 it was awarded the only First Class Certificate at the RHS's Great Trial of Asters, from 300 cultivars trialled.

Nonetheless, during World War II the plant disappeared from cultivation until the mid-1990s when the late Charles Puddle (head gardener at Bodnant) sought help in identifying some "tall grey" asters. Naturally he turned to Old Court, the nursery founded by Ballard and now the home of the Plant Heritage National Collection of autumn flowering asters. When the plants flowered they were swiftly identified as 'Beauty of Colwall' and since then it has become re-established as a major part of the collection.



The stories of these four plants illustrate some of the work of Plant Heritage in conserving our garden and cultural histories for future generations to enjoy. Plant Heritage is a charity supported entirely by membership subscriptions and donations.