



North East Group
Newsletter - Spring 2019



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Cover image: *Corydalis ochroleuca* in Brian Whitton's National Collection.

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Plant Heritage

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Articles, snippets and photographs are always welcome.

Opinions expressed in NE Newsletter are those of the authors and / or the editors and don't necessarily reflect those of the Charity as a whole. The editors reserve the right to edit contributions.

The deadline for your articles, pictures and ideas for the Autumn 2019 Bulletin is Friday 11th October.



Editorial

As an organisation that manages National Collections and promotes the conservation of garden plants, what should we make of the fact that in the 2018 RHS Plant Finder there are, for example, 18 pages of Hosta, 16 of Iris, 22 of Primula, and 33 of Rosa? That these are examples of some of the most popular herbaceous perennials must influence breeders and retailers who know that every new variety will create a rush to buy. Compare that to single species plants such as *Horminum* or *Saruma* that have somehow never hit the horticultural headlines. Short of finding a naturally-occurring sport or carrying out some complex genetic manipulation, there's little chance that 'an exciting range' will ever be developed, yet these plants are no less interesting or attractive for that. But they're doomed (or fortunate) to have to be actively sought from more specialist nurseries. James Armitage has written a pertinent essay in *The Garden* (RHS, March 2019) entitled "Are there too many plants"; in which he questions the genuine horticultural (as opposed to commercial) value of the "crop of new names" that appears each spring. As an example, he also questions the need to hoard every Hybrid Tea rose that has ever existed, suggesting that the loss of a few is not an "irrevocable disaster". We should distinguish between the ecological importance of conserving wild plants and the mere human collecting instinct that makes us want to conserve every "essentially ephemeral" cultivar or variant a human has ever created. Plant Heritage is already aware that DNA testing reveals duplication in plant naming, where small variations turn out not to be due to significant genetic differences, but this is an expensive process which will not benefit all NC holders. James Armitage suggests the application of a formula that prioritises the value of cultivars; the existing PH criteria, namely Historical, Horticultural, Reference and the old category Scientific already go some way to controlling and rationalising our National Collections, but nevertheless all NC holders are faced with the annual problem of new varieties which have to be assessed over time in some way. The problem gets an airing elsewhere in the magazine – even in 1938 it was worth comment, and it's an issue that frustrates Collection holder Ray Stephenson.



Saruma henryi

Suzanne Stanley



Chair's Report Spring 2019

Fortunately this spring has been less dramatic than 2018 and my garden has taken full advantage of the sunshine and warmth. Galanthus and Narcissus were in flower earlier than usual and early blossoming trees have managed to keep their petals for longer.

Looking forward, this is a busy time of year for PHNE. Our last indoor meeting of Spring will be followed just a week later by the **Plant Sale at Kirkley Hall (Sunday 19th May)**. This year we should have the results of the Propagation Group's efforts for sale in addition to the generous donations from our usual contributors. Do take this opportunity to buy some different, and perhaps more unusual, plants for your garden.

We are trying to encourage more of our members to visit the regional National Collections when they have Open Days. This year we will focus on Ray Stephenson's extensive collection of Sedum and related genera on **Sunday 16th June** between 10am - 4pm with an informal outdoor gathering to view the collection in the company of other members. Just turn up at a time to suit you.

This year we have been invited to have a stand at Belsay in Bloom at the end of June and are looking forward to promoting the work of Plant Heritage to a wider audience. If you would like to help with this event please contact Isobel or me for further details.

Finally we have our **Plant Fair on Sunday 7th July** when we bring regional nurseries to Blagdon to make the purchase of choice and interesting plants so much easier for you. We have adjusted the timing slightly this year, so plants and refreshments will be available from 11am to 3pm and the grounds will be open until 4pm for all visitors. I find it difficult to believe I am writing this, but we are hoping the weather will be cooler than last year.

Happy Gardening,

Roz Cooper



Recent Events

In November, AGS member **Alan Furness** described what to most of us is unimaginable in damp Northumberland – an alpine meadow garden. He defined alpine strata: the bare heights where dwell crevice plants (“that don’t like other plants”), the mobile scree where plants are “isolationists” and adapted to moving, the grasses and richer vegetation that skirt the scree, and then meadow level which supports many different species in short grass. He has created limestone scree, tufa beds, and habitats for acid-lovers, and utilised the different habitats provided by the north- and south-facing slopes of a little valley with a damp bottom. He described the prolific clumps of candelabra primula from seed he just “threw down”, and the celmisias, gentians, primulas and pulsatillas that are just a few of the species he has nurtured.

It is impossible to do justice here to the overall appearance of his garden, and to the range of plants which reads like a global alpine nursery catalogue. It is a remarkable achievement in Northumbrian countryside.

In December, landscape architect **Richard Barnes** talked about a different sort of structure in the garden – the value of hard landscape to create different levels, textures, colour contrasts and a wider range of planting habitats, by introducing paths, steps and fences to define areas of the garden, as well as water features and garden sculpture.

At January’s AGM, college lecturer and snowdrop expert **Michael D Myers** introduced *Galanthus philistines* like me to an eye-opening range. It’s easy to dismiss the species as “little white flowers that all look alike”, and so they may do from a distance, but Michael’s own 250+ varieties (of which we saw a fair number!) are fascinatingly different close up. His talk did



Galanthus elwesii var. *elwesii* 'Fred's Giant'



encourage us to buy a wider range this winter to add to our Plant Guardian ward *G. elwesii* 'Fred's Giant'. But you have to be a true enthusiast to pay £80-£90 per bulb (and certainly the £265 paid in 2008 for a single specimen of the double form *G. nivalis* 'Flocon de Neige').

Faith Douglas, Curator of North Yorkshire's Thorp Perrow Arboretum, provided an illustrated tour of this 90-acre garden with its 5 National Collections. It was a reminder that trees are a vital part of the PH remit, and that we have many National Collections in our area. Trees are increasingly under threat from disease, mismanagement including the effects of disastrous pruning, felling to satisfy (often misguided) risk managers, rampant house-building and road development, and from natural ageing where

there is no successional planting. Disease, over-crowding and some 'pruning errors' have required hard decisions to be made at Thorp Perrow, some dramatically changing its appearance, but following Sir John Ropner's sudden death, the Arboretum is in the safe hands of an experienced and dedicated team.

Suzanne Stanley

Membership Update

Our Branch membership news is good. We have 134 members and in the year since April 2018, though 10 people resigned, 15 joined us (and as a bonus, of those who turned up despite Nick Bailey's cancellation at least 5 are keen to join us soon).

Pat Skews

Hemerocallis

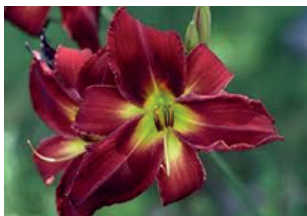
True to form, we had one, rather liked it, bought another and then more. That seems to be our natural pattern of buying plants. We now have at least 20 cultivars and species. Along the way we have acquired and discarded (well, split and sent to the Plant Sale) some of the varieties because they were too big for the space we were able to allow them and having learnt from that experience we now only grow those that are well behaved.

Hemerocallis, otherwise known as Day Lilies, comes from the Greek for 'beautiful' (*kallos*) and 'for a day' (*hemera*), and is aptly named. Mostly the flowers open at first light, mature as the day progresses, wither at dusk and



die overnight. Although each individual flower has a lifespan of just a day, each stem has a cluster of buds which open one at a time. Over a couple of months, usually July and August, there is a continual show of colour which is even better if the plant is mature, as there will be several stems bearing a flower on each plant. Some species flower earlier in the year and others later, so a whole season of colour is possible if you have the space. *H. lilio-asphodelus* opens its flowers in the evening, filling the air with a beautiful scent and clearly attracting different pollinators. Introduced to this country as a culinary and medicinal herb around the 15th century, the unopened buds were used in salads or stir fries. *H. citrina* buds were and are, in China today, used to thicken soups.

The tawny orange trumpets of *H. fulva* can be seen in Chinese paintings of the 12th century and with the scented pale yellow *H. flava*, both very hardy, formed the basis of plant breeding. They were not popular until the early 20th century when the Canadian Dr Albert Steward joined forces with American's Dr Arlow Stout in a breeding programme. Steward, working at Nanking University, sent seeds and plants from China to America for Stout to hybridise. His work produced over 100 viable hybrids from the 15 known species. That was in the 1930s, but today there are 23 known species in existence in the wild and over 40,000 hybrids. Many are available only in America, but slowly more are appearing in European garden centres and nurseries. From an initial orange and yellow colour range, they now range from the palest yellow to deepest burgundy with a few pinks in between. The form has also been developed from single trumpets to almost flat



Hemerocallis 'Breathless Beauty'

© D & M Goodchild



Hemerocallis 'Summer Wine'

© D & M Goodchild



flowers, spiders, doubles and ruffles. Some flowers are a single colour and some bi-coloured or multi-coloured.

Hemerocallis are not fussy plants, apart from liking the sun, though will respond well to good soil and feeding. They can cope with drought conditions but watering produces the best flowers and whilst the garden is best, they can be grown in containers. They need re-potting annually as they rapidly fill any space they are given and exhaust the nutrients, and watering needs to be carefully monitored as they are very leafy. Dwarf varieties such as *H.* 'Stella D'Oro' grow well in pots.

Slugs and snails love to overwinter in the basal foliage so cutting back at the end of the season is a wise precaution. These creatures also enjoy any new growth as fodder in the spring. Otherwise the only real pest is the Hemerocallis gall midge which lays its eggs in the flower buds where the grubs distort them and therefore the flowers. The affected buds look rounded rather than elongated and must be removed and burnt (not composted) as soon as they are seen, so the pests do not have a chance to hatch and attack other flowers. Dead-heading is essential to prevent the plants setting seed and ceasing their flower production. Dead flowers snap off easily, but beware - the darker shades will stain the fingers.

Propagation is by seed or division – ensure each section has a piece of root and some foliage. They can be divided at any time of year but plants split just before the flowering season will forfeit that year's blooms, so autumn and winter are the ideal times.

Like all the plants we grow, my favourite is the one I am looking at, but I do like those characteristic of the original species: single trumpet or near-trumpet flowers. As far as colour goes I tend towards the softer shades of *H.* 'Summer Wine' and the darker burgundy shades such as *H.* 'Breathless Beauty'. The fanciful shapes and bi-colours, even though scented do not really interest me. However, I can agree that a very mature plant of the vigorous *H.* 'Corky' full of bright yellow simple trumpet flowers is very uplifting on a bright summer morning.

Marjorie Goodchild



Durham Botanic Garden

Mike Hughes is the Head Gardener at Durham Botanic Garden, which was founded in 1970 by David Bellamy and Brian Whitton amongst others. Originally intended as a functioning horticultural garden, with planting representing different geographical areas and managed by the Botany Department, the Garden is now run by the Estates Department and seen as a resource for organisations such as schools, and a destination for families.

Situated on the outskirts of the city, the Garden is benefitting from a renewed interest in plant and habitat conservation, as well as its proximity to the Park-and-Ride facility on the A177. This has made visitor parking so much easier, particularly with its new visitor entrance. The garden team comprises 5 gardeners, but as there is currently no Curator, Director or Education Team, it is the gardeners who manage its day-to-day running as well as providing a children's self-guided tour, and working with the Friends of the Garden plus agencies such as Natural England and the British Trust for Ornithology.

The 80,000 members of the public who visit annually will still see some of the original geographical plantings – the North American Arboretum, greenhouses with

Desert and Tropical sections, and Oriental garden – but to these have now been added statues and a lake, a Visitor Centre, wild flower meadows, a woodland garden with stream and a Bug Unit containing a Houdini Tarantula, Madagascan Hissing Cockroaches and giant millipedes.

Plant Heritage members may be more interested in the planting areas and unusual specimens. There are New Zealand and Australian collections which include *Celmisias*, and Toffee Trees in the Japanese Garden. In the greenhouses there are Bougainvilleas, a giant water lily and the corpse flower, Titan Arum (*Amorphophallus titanum*). Visitors are encouraged to look at the North-East flora and the native wildlife that they support, for example the Copper Butterfly and the Chimney Sweeper Moth. The plants in the magnesium limestone gardens have been collected with Natural England from a few miles away.

There are events to draw in children and families: an Easter chick hunt, Lumière, and a Plant Sale organised by the Friends of the Garden. Future projects – expanding the woodland areas and developing wildflower meadows - will ensure that the Garden maintains its appeal in years to come. If you are lucky, your



visit might coincide with a Police Forensics training exercise or with archaeological research involving calibration pits. Alternatively, between June and September you might be in the glass observation hive watching bees do their waggle dance.

This was a fascinating talk providing an insight into the work of a Botanic Garden in the 21st century, showing

how diversifying is permitting the Garden to thrive and develop beyond its original brief.

Note: the garden is open from 10-5pm March to October and 10-4pm November to February. You can sign up for email alerts so that you stay in touch. Joint Friends membership costs £19 a year. www.dur.ac.uk/botanic.garden.

Isobel Shaw

Notes from Howick - Spring 2019

It has been a good winter here at Howick, as we were able to get on with a lot of work due to the fine dry, warm conditions which also meant that some of the early flowering plants and bulbs are probably a couple of weeks earlier than 'normal'.

In Silverwood we've been doing more clearing, this time taking out a large and very straggly *Hydrangea villosa* and replacing it with more wild-collected *Rhododendrons* brought in from the Arboretum plus some cultivated ones



Rhododendron sinogrande
© Robert Jamieson



from Glendoick Nursery. We will split plants already in the wood to fill the rest of this area with herbaceous material such as *Meconopsis*, *Primula*, *Geum* and *Euphorbia*, along with many of the spring bulbs. It looks to be a good year for some of the large leaf *Rhododendrons* to flower; some of the young *Rh. sino-grande* in particular have quite a few flower buds on them which hopefully will not get frosted so that we should have a good show in early April.

The beds around the goldfish pond have been tidied up through the winter by removing some of the old *Cistus* which had just become too big for this area, digging them all over, and replanting some of the existing low growing material such as *Campanula*, *Alchemilla* and *Stachys*. This will be added to with some new material and by splitting up some plants from other borders.

Around the pond to the north of the Hall we have removed the planting and replaced it with four pyramidal yews which hopefully will grow well here, but at only 1.2m tall it will be a while before they become a feature.

Spring is always a good time in the nursery when things start to germinate and one can see that last year's collecting trip has been worthwhile. Most of our seed sown for the Arboretum this year comes from a trip to Slovenia in late August, where staff from Ljubljana Botanic Garden made an excellent job of arranging everything for us and accompanying colleagues from Benmore Botanic Garden and me to ensure that we could make lots of collections. Much of that seed is now germinating so it looks as though we have handled them successfully. Any seeds that we want to store are put into the freezer. We have also sown stored seeds of those plants where we have either none or very few of them in the Arboretum, so it will be interesting to see what sort of germination we get from them as some have been stored for over 20 years.

We have added another new area to the Arboretum by clearing old Laurel and Sycamore at the side of the back drive between the garden and The Damses. Here we have planted a lot of *Malus* and then underplanted with *Narcissus* 'Seagull' and *N. poeticus* which in years to come should give us a good show.



Sorbus aria

© Robert Jamieson

Robert Jamieson, Head Gardener



COLLECTION HOLDERS' MEETING

Wednesday 27th March

The North East Collection Holders had their biennial meeting at the invitation of Stephen Heslop and Houghall Campus of East Durham College. Houghall has held a collection of *Sorbus* for a long time. We welcomed a number of collection holders and members of the local PH committee. We were very pleased that Vicki Cooke, the new Plant Conservation Manager and Lucy Pitman, Plant Conservation Officer, were able to join us from Head Office, and the northern regional collection coordinator, Ross Kerby from Edinburgh. Trevor Greene, a retired Head Gardener from Houghall also attended.

Dianne Nichol-Brown (*Polemonium*, *Hakonechloa* and *Fragaria*) outlined her approach to record keeping and showed pottery related to her collections. Ray Stephenson (*Sedum*) highlighted the importance of sharing for plant survival and of the plant exchange through the Sedum Society. He reported on a recent trip to Bulgaria to find *Sedum* in the wild, and Brian Whitton (*Corydalis*) reported on his recent trips to Gothenburg and China and attempts to spread his collection



Brian, Vicki and Ross
at *Corydalis* collection

© Faith Williams

for succession planning. Roz Cooper updated on the preliminary application for a dispersed collection of *Physocarpus* in the North-East reporting that she hoped to obtain plant material from the RHS trial at Wisley. Faith Williams commented on the naming and identification issues of her preliminary collection of *Erodium*.

Stephen outlined some of the challenges to the collection of *Sorbus* at Houghall due to lack of funds, change in emphasis in college management, and reduced numbers of related staff. Trevor Greene, head gardener at Houghall in its hey-day, outlined the stages of setting up the collection, pinetum, arboretum and woodland garden since 1967. We also had



updates from Vicki and Lucy about changes at Plant Heritage and Roz about Plant Guardians. There were discussions about what collection holders needed from the local group and Head Office. There was some interest in a further workshop in the north east and a proposal that we might buy some root stock for the grafting programme for the *Sorbus* collection at Houghall.

After buffet lunch we had a short tour of the *Sorbus* collection and Houghall arboretum which looked good with daffodils in full flower. Brian hosted Vicki, Lucy and Ross at his garden in Durham to see the collection of *Corydalis* which was in full bloom before our visitors left by train.

Faith Williams

David Nichol-Brown

Just as this was going to the printer, we heard the sad news from Dianne that David had died very suddenly from a heart attack on Tuesday 16th April. They were visiting a Yorkshire village, about to give a talk on National Plant Collections. David was very much a part of our group, a regular attendee at our talks and Blagdon Plant Fair, and for Dianne, he was a vital part of their work with their plants. We'll miss him, and we extend our deepest sympathy to Dianne. We will write a full appreciation of David in the Autumn newsletter.

Public talk by Nick Bailey

As you'll be aware, our 'prestige lecture' in April was cancelled at the last minute owing to Nick Bailey's illness. For the sake of those who hadn't picked up the message, we went ahead with the plant sale plus tea and cakes, and had a remarkably sociable and remunerative event, taking £362 for the Charity from plant sales and donations for refreshments (though from that we must take room hire, printing and other costs). The consensus was that Nick's talk would still be appreciated, so we're aiming to re-book it when / if he's available.

Please contact Roz or Alan with your ticket or ticket number if you need a refund (new tickets will be available to buy if we can re-book his talk).



Too Tall?

Can perennial plants be too tall for your garden? The short answer is yes, especially if planted in the wrong place, end of discussion. However, many of us want variation in height in a border and perennial plants offer different solutions to the more permanent structure from shrubs and trees. I have been experimenting with taller plants, identifying those which can stand tall without support. My definition of tall is 1.5m (5ft) and above.

An excellent self-supporting plant is *Thalictrum* 'Elin' which is usually over 2m in my garden and remains upright in a fairly exposed position. Feathery purple flowers are pretty but can be overlooked especially when looking down on accompanying planting. I also have *Thalictrum* 'Black Stockings' which is around 30cm shorter so the flowers are more visible. *Thalictrum flavum* subsp. *glaucom* has lovely pale yellow flowers and is sometimes self-supporting, but can lean dramatically or collapse after strong winds. If not staked quickly after collapse the horizontal stems will start to grow up at the end making it difficult to hold upright later.

Another experiment has been *Solidago altissima* in two locations. The first planting under the overhang of a tree grows tall and self-supporting, but the flowers are not sufficiently visible. A second plant in a more exposed border failed to stand up last year and even managed to pull over individual cane supports. The drought may have been a factor, so it has a reprieve to try and perform better this year. *Helianthus* 'Lemon Queen' makes a tall dramatic clump (1.5-1.8m) in late summer. However *H.* 'Sheila's Sunshine' is much taller (2m+) and so far proving more difficult to place successfully. An unintended 'Chelsea chop' one year merely delayed flowering whilst the plant tried to achieve its desired height. I am about to try *H. maximiliani*,



Actaea simplex
'Brunette'

© Roz Cooper



Symphotrichum
'Helen Picton'

© Roz Cooper



with yellow flowers all the way up the 1.5-2m stems. This is a plant from David Goodchild which even he describes as “too tall”.

Coreopsis tripteris 'Mostenveld' flowered well last year at around 1.5m with typical yellow flowers. I bought this from Dr. Andrew Ward when he came to give a talk to our group and, checking his catalogue, have discovered that he also offers *C. tripteris* 'Red November' which has red autumn colour. One more to try.

Actaea simplex Atropurpurea Group grows to 1.8m plus with fragrant flowers. A.s. 'Brunette' and 'Pink Spire' are slightly smaller but equally good and all stay upright in my garden although untested in exposed conditions.

Some asters make the height minimum and generally stay upright. *Symphotrichum novae angliae* 'Helen Picton' is listed as 1.2m high but I think it grows taller in my garden, although not measured. The first flowers open on top of the stalk so are difficult to see, but as more flowers open they face outward and make a wonderful bright purple show. *S. novi-belgii* 'Sam Banham' (1.5m) has white flowers and *S. lanceolatum* 'Edwin Beckett' (1.6m) has small pale pink flowers. A new aster to try, bought last year at Eggleston Hall, is *Aster* 'Black Betty' reputedly 2m tall.

Veronicastrum sachalinense is a purple flowered tall variety which remains upright when young but older clumps sometimes have leaning stems. *V.* 'Pink Glow' is listed as reaching 1.6m but has yet to achieve this in my garden. *Inula elecampane* is reliably self-supporting with yellow flowers that attract insects and butterflies. Many of the seed heads on tall stalks will remain upright through the winter too. I have *Lilium pardalinum* growing nearby and they support each other. *Cephalaria gigantea* also thrives and so far has not required staking.

I have a love-hate relationship with *Echinops bannaticus* (if that is the correct name). I grew this from seed and that should have been a warning that it would self-seed everywhere. It grows at the back of the border too near to a beech hedge so every year it looks as if it will be tall and upright when it flowers but a late strong wind always reduces it to leaning stems overlying other plants. Bees and hoverflies love it so I am trying another clump away from the hedge. I also have *Echinops tienshanicum* which does manage to stay up but that might be because it has no space to fall over. This also seeds less enthusiastically. *Sanguisorba tenuifolia* is another self-seeder, so I am going to investigate alternative tall sanguisorbas.

I could mention many more, but if you have a favourite tall perennial, I would love to hear about it.

Roz Cooper



Is enough enough?

Collection holders throughout the British Isles are flabbergasted by the number of new cultivars flooding the market via garden centres or on-line. This view was shared at the Collection Holders' Meeting in March this year. Some are saying they cannot keep up with so many different new selections being offered each year, most of which are little (if any) different from already available species or choices.

At the two extremes of sources of new cultivars are: a) genuine nurseries crossing existing plants, examining the progeny, selecting the offspring with special features, destroying the rest, and multi-propagating the new exciting creations, which can take a number of years and is to be applauded; and b) at the other extreme: nurseries with a plant whose name or origin they are unsure of, or are too lazy to investigate, find it is incredibly easy to propagate and in one season can produce 100s of cuttings to sell the following season. Their selling point will be an easy, memorable, attractive name (relevance to the nature of the plant sometimes being completely ignored). The general public like a catchy name, so in 2019 the following names have been widely distributed: 'Beach Party', 'Cherry Truffle', 'Dark Knight', 'Desert Black', 'Frosted Fire', 'Merida', and 'Touchdown Teak Autumn'. All of these are being sold as *Sedum* but all are *Hylotelephium* (I fail to see the connection between *Hylotelephium* and "beach" or "desert"). In a few years when many of these have lost their labels, they will probably turn up again with some newly invented appellation. Over the last decade many such plants, available in huge numbers for a year or two, have disappeared. Do I hear someone say, "Good riddance"? Few had memorable qualities, but many were prone to fungal infections, attractive to aphids, or collapsed in anything more than a 15mph wind. Of these, several had been awarded RHS recommendations.

This genus doesn't have the monopoly of such fecundity, as ordinary *Phedimus kantschaticus* is being sold as *Sedum* 'Little Miss Sunshine', *Rhodiola pachycladosis* as *Sedum* 'White Diamond', *S. mexicanum* has become *S. sediforme* 'Kent Belle'. To add to the confusion – for nearly 20 years *S. sediforme* has been a *Petrosedum*. I have only spoken of plants within my sphere of interest but I do realise that we are all suffering from this determination to flood the market with recycled taxa purporting to be new and special.

Ray Stephenson (ray@sedumray.ndo.co.uk)



Gladiolus – a view from the archive



Gladiolus 'Alba'

© Suzanne Stanley

Dame Edna possibly hasn't done a lot for the reputation of gladioli, but in 1938 when Barry Humphries was still a small boy, Francis Boon wrote "*The gladiolus is not modest. It does not escape or evade examination. It has a strong personality. If there is something wrong with that personality, there is no escaping the wrongness of it. . . . It has been crossed and re-crossed until no man knows the beginning or end. It is a very wise gladiolus that knows its own father, and as for grandparents. . . . It is a distressing fact that inferior hybrids are often more prolific (and sometimes more robust) than their betters. They are also cheaper. The unfortunate consequence of this is that there are innumerable nasty gladioli being grown, [as a result of which] there are innumerable strong and nasty personalities passing themselves off as typical gladioli.*" Phew! I wish we could see some examples. He further comments that there are "enormous lists of named varieties plenty [of which] are bad

enough – there is no point in courting disgust by buying unnamed corms”. (My Garden. March, 1938).

Despite the rant, Mr Boon was converted from hate to adoration by seeing “lovely varieties . . . properly grown”. These were G. ‘Picardy’ (brilliant pink with a yellow throat), ‘J.S. Bach’ (orange-salmon), ‘Marmora’ (lavender-grey, red throat), ‘Mrs Anna Pfitzer’ (creamy white with yellow-green blotch), ‘Salbach’s Orchid’ (orchid – lavender pink), ‘Fata Morgana’ (peach with amber throat), ‘Yellow Perfection’ (“*the best yellow*”), ‘Tennyson’ (smoky red with creamy throat), ‘Betty Nuthall’ (salmon orange), ‘Mother Machree’ (smoky lavender and pink), ‘Pelegrina’ (strong dark purple), and ‘Nocturno’ (deep, dark, velvety maroon). It occurred to him that “*the pink and violet shades, especially Picardy and Pelegrina, would look exceptionally well against a background of blue-grey conifers*”.

Again, I wish we could see what he saw, but there are no current references to these varieties. Searches return no results at all for ‘J.S. Bach’, ‘Fata Morgana’ and ‘Nocturno’, and there are only archival sources, mainly in the 1920s and ‘30s for the others. Mary Hampden in her book ‘Bulb Gardening’ (1921) mentions ‘Tennyson’. Dame Edna would be pleased to know that an Australian source ‘The Queenslander’ (5th August 1937) refers to ‘Pelegrina’ and ‘Mother Machree’. No doubt a trawl of nurserymen’s catalogues of the period would reveal all (and who wouldn’t want to see a copy of ‘Dreer’s novelties and specialities 1939’?). However, I remain unconverted, and will stick to the modest G. ‘Alba’, and G. *murielae*.

Suzanne Stanley

Plant Guardians

The roll call of our local plants in guardianship has changed: there are a few withdrawals due to cold weather or pest and disease outbreaks, and a few additions. So we remain at around 55 plants in total. We would like to do our bit to achieve the national target of increasing the participation in the scheme by 60% by the end of 2020, so do consider carefully if you have rare plants that could be part of the scheme. Also, if you received plants in any recent Plant Exchange, they are usually eligible with just a few exceptions. I know that I like to grow Plant Exchange plants for a year to ensure they will survive, and that may well apply to you too, but do not forget to actually register them.

Roz Cooper



Proposed Dispersed National Collection of *Physocarpus*

On behalf of the North East Group I submitted a Proposal for a National Collection of *Physocarpus* (dispersed) to the Plant Conservation Committee in March. We received a positive response and have been encouraged to submit a full application when some of the plants recently purchased are more established and we have located and added more of the identified missing cultivars to our group holding.

The recommended establishment period for shrubs is 3 years so we might wait until early 2021 to make the full submission. In the meantime I will be working with Lucy Pitman, Plant Conservation Officer, to try and locate some of the cultivars which currently have zero suppliers in the Plant Finder. RHS Wisley is participating in a EuroTrial of *Physocarpus* which concludes in 2020 and I intend to visit it this year, hoping to take photographs of all the cultivars. We are interested in hearing about any *Physocarpus* growing in your garden if you haven't already contacted us. If you would like to join the group growing *Physocarpus* but do not currently own one please contact me or Faith Williams.

Roz Cooper



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All the Colours of Jupiter's Beard?

Visit the castle on Holy Island and you will see that the castle walls and surrounding cliffs are liberally strewn with a plant called "Red Valerian" (alternative names are "Red Spur Valerian" or "Jupiter's Beard"). The botanical name is *Centranthus ruber*. It is said that these plants are the descendants of those planted by Gertrude Jekyll, who did this by loading the muzzle of a shotgun with balls of seed and firing them at the rock and stone.



Belford *Centranthus*

© Alan Briggs

In May 2011, I took a train from London to Penzance. It's a long journey and I had plenty of time to stare out

the window. The most abundant flowering plant I saw growing by the tracks was Red Valerian. Despite the name, it isn't always red; there is indeed a distinctive dark red form but I also saw a pink and a white form. It has the fleshy leaves that indicate a plant adapted to a limited supply of water and it has fluffy seeds, easily carried off in the wind. So it self-sows in walls and on rocks, in poor soil or in gravel, including the gravel found by railway tracks. Although Gertrude Jekyll must have liked it, it tends to be under-valued by gardeners. And if you pick some and take it inside you may find that it has a rank scent reminiscent of pigsties or cat pee. But it seems that not everybody smells this, so you might want to give it a try if you have some growing.

Back to my train journey: watching the Red Valerian go past, mile after mile, I started to wonder how many different colours it came in, and whether there are rarer forms beyond the three common ones. So when I got home I began to research this online. I found a blogger who showed pictures of a pale pink form which he reckoned he saw 0.00001% of the time. And then on the website of Cotswold Garden Flowers I found *Centranthus ruber* "First Blush",





C. ruber First Blush

© Alan Briggs

a colour form described as “soft lilac”. Bob Brown had documented this plant but unfortunately, as with many others, decided it wasn't worth selling. Fortunately, he had mentioned its originator “Kurt Iwnicki in South Wales”. Back on-line I traced an address for Kurt, a retired engineer, and wrote to him to express my interest. He very generously sent me a big parcel with several plants of his “First Blush”. Not all of these survived the journey but I managed to keep some going and to bring some with me to my new garden in Northumberland. It seems to come true from seed and I have been able to root some cuttings taken in spring, although my success rate is only about 25%. The colour is only a little off-white but it is certainly different. I have supplied a couple of plants into

the Plant Exchange and it is now a registered plant in the Plant Guardian scheme. So I hope to have saved a plant that might otherwise have died out before it really got started.

I am still on the lookout for other colour forms so please let me know if you grow one. House-hunting in Belford last year I came across the pale form in between some normal reds but I have yet to make a side-by-side comparison with “First Blush”.

Alan Briggs



Centranthus - Pink form

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2019 Programme

- 12th January** **AGM + Michael Myers:** "Snowdrops and snowflakes".
- 9th February** **Faith Douglas:** "Thorp Perrow 5 National Collections".
- 9th March** **Mike Hughes:** "Durham Botanic Garden".
- 13th April** **Nick Bailey:** "365 Days of Colour in Your Garden".
- 11th May** **Chris Mullin:** "My Walled Garden in Northumberland".
- 19th May** **Plant Heritage Plant Sale,** Kirkley Hall College.
- 7th July** **Plant Heritage Plant Fair,** Blagdon Hall Estate.
- August** **Members' Garden Party - tbc.**
- 12th October** **Andrew Davenport:** "Gardener's Cottage".
- 9th November** **Jan Hoyland:** "Wildlife Gardening".
- 14th December** **Members' Christmas event + John Richards:** "SE Tibet: Botanical Treasure Trove".
- 11th January 2020** **AGM + Talk tbc**

Meetings at 2.00 for a 2.30pm start, in
Ponteland Memorial Hall, Darras Road, Ponteland NE20 9NX,

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'Plant Heritage seeks to conserve, document, promote and make available Britain and Ireland's rich diversity of garden plants for the benefit of everyone through horticulture, education and science'.