

# DEVON NEWSLETTER

Summer 2009



**HARDY? \* OPEN DAYS \* MORE FERNS  
DEVON PLANTSPEOPLE: MARION WOOD**

# NCCPG DEVON GROUP

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## **THE MISSION**

The NCCPG seeks to conserve, document, promote and make available Britain and Ireland's rich biodiversity of garden plants for the benefit of everyone through horticulture, education and science

# DEVON GROUP PLANT SALES 2009

- ② Saturday & Sunday 25-26 April at Rosemoor  
NCCPG members free, otherwise normal garden entrance
- ② Monday 25 May at Castle Hill, Filleigh, South Molton  
Entry £4 (£3 for NCCPG members) includes the Park & Garden
- ② Sunday 5 July in South Molton Pannier Market
- ② Sunday 6 September at Rosemoor  
NCCPG members free, otherwise normal garden entrance
- ① Sunday 20 September in Tavistock Pannier Market.

Sales start at 10 o'clock, members free except Castle Hill

For organizers details see page 2

- ① Tim Millar
- ② Derek Burdett

## EDITOR'S NOTES

Spring has pushed through with fury after being held back for so long in that period of frost and snow. There may be high losses in the garden but we should not be deterred nor too hasty in clearing things away, there may yet be green shoots. A few plants may yet surprise us.

The RHS has organised a survey of what was lost or survived during this cold winter. Why should a tender *Phlomis* species be untouched while *Melianthus major* is cut to the ground? Roger Stuckey has written about his findings for his garden.

Check the Insert, Area Events and News sections for full details of the latest visits for this year.

Finally, the Devon Group is still in need of a secretary. Please consider taking this important position and contact the Chairman.

**David Cann**

## MEMBERSHIP RATES:

Single £25

Joint £40

Student £15

Gardening clubs &

non-commercial groups £40

Corporate £70

**Cover:** *Astrantia major* 'Shaggy'

**Courtesy:** Ann Cann

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# CHAIRMANS LETTER

Dear Members

Thank you everyone for appointing me as your Chairman - even though when I was asked I was not even a member! So, it will be a long learning process and I hope that the committee and members will understand this and humour me.

My immediate impressions are of a dedicated and knowledgeable band of people who face a number of challenges. We are not unique in that.

Some members have already identified to me areas where we need to have a clearer vision e.g. establishing priorities and making clear plans to achieve them.

We need to examine in this consumer age how to increase membership levels, and to encourage younger folk to have a real interest in plantsmanship, how to promote rare plants to the broader public who are so used to simply picking up what is on offer at the local garden centre, to assist and encourage our members to continue to act as custodians of definitive collections of plants, from which future generations will benefit, rather like the Government at the moment (!) we need to consider how our finances work, for us particularly the relationship between local and national level. I note the tension that exists. Some people feel strongly that more resources should be available to us from national level; to enable us to support national collection holders in our area rather more than we do now and also to defray our own expenses incurred in connection with the society.

I am open to your views as we try to forge a way ahead. My email address is [j.turner100@btinternet.com](mailto:j.turner100@btinternet.com) if you wish to contact me.

As I write this to you, despite the coldest weather conditions for many years, I am looking at the wonderful catkins and seed-heads on my alders, an often underrated genus in my opinion! Ending on an optimistic note, I am reminded that what we share as a group is a real love and enthusiasm for our gardens.

Yours, **John Turner**

## ADVANCE NOTICE

1) Wednesday 21th October at Longdown Village Hall.

Meeting on ways forward for the Devon Group. We hope to have most Committee members present, to provide tea and coffee ad lib and a light midday meal. If you have any thoughts about the meeting, any topics you wish considered, any presentations you wish to make in writing, please contact John Turner or Trevor Wood.

2) The date of the AGM is the 14th November 2009 and will be held at Rosemoor RHS Gardens, 10am until 4pm, as last year. Times of the AGM and speaker will be notified in the next newsletter with an application form for attendance.

# ARTEMISIA & NERIUM OLEANDER OPEN DAY

## SUNDAY 20 SEPTEMBER 2009 10am-4pm

It is with some trepidation that we are opening the garden for visitors to see the plant collections this autumn as we are still in the early stages of settling them into their new home. The garden is a woodland setting on the NW edge of Sidmouth, having once been part of a Victorian garden. There are some fine specimen trees: *Parrotia persica*, *Robinia pseudoacacia*, *Cryptomeria japonica* and *Ginkgo biloba*. Plants beloved of the era: cherry laurel, Portuguese laurel, *Aucuba* and *Gunnera* had proliferated, seemingly untouched for several generations along with native scourges such as holly, bramble, docks and nettles, not forgetting the wild garlic. Having sorted out diseased and dangerous trees and cut back sufficiently to let in some day light it became apparent that there were also some lovely native plants and flowers. So a careful as you go policy evolved whilst we attempted to find sites suitable for the *Artemisia*. Some have been planted in a south facing bed prepared from a grassy bank, having added sand and grit to improve the drainage. The plants appeared to be making good progress until the ravages of this last winter took effect. We are hoping for a kind summer season in which they can recover.



*Nerium oleander* 'Mont Blanc'

Some oleanders were planted out in sheltered site whilst the remainder stood temporarily in pots along side a south facing wall for the winter 2007/8 and fared quite nicely. The most recent winter was quite another matter and some have been lost. However in



*Nerium oleander* 'Angiolo Pucci'

keeping with talk of 'green shoots of recovery' in respect of the economic situation, we may be able to identify hardier forms which might be suited to outdoor cultivation. Surprisingly, several plants planted in the open ground on a steep east facing slope appear to have fared better than most others during the freezing conditions.

The grounds run to about 2.5 acres of wooded hillside with a central south facing bowl which incorporates a spring fed pond and small stream. There was no fruit or vegetable growing areas on arrival and we have planted fruit and enclosed a vegetable area, as well as turning an old hard core tennis court into a series of raised beds, for vegetable and nursery production. Subject to any further winter losses, there should be over 300 *Artemisia* (more species than cultivars) and over 30 oleander varieties to see at the Open Day.



Address is Farthingwood, Broadway, Sidmouth EX10 8HS. The *Artemisia* Collection has Scientific status. Very limited parking at site, use The Knowle (EDDC Council Offices) car park which operates as a free weekend Park and Ride site. About 120 yards walk from there.

*Artemisia gorgonium*

**Jean and John Twibell**

# NORMAN STEVENSON PUGH

Steve was our Chairman of the Devon Group of the NCCPG from 1986 to 1989 and it is with sadness that we report his death in January of this year. His wife Iris had been recruited, like many of our older members, by Lady Anne Berry (then Lady Anne Palmer) and was the North Devon Events Organiser until 1990. Steve assumed the chairmanship at a time of some stress in the Group and as Iris gently remarked before his election, "You know that Steve likes to have his own way". He certainly had a way of making things happen. During his time the Group membership increased to a thousand and he was our Fund Raiser nationally, and he was also a strong advocate of 'Plant Heritage' as the primary title of our organisation despite overwhelming opposition both locally and nationally. One wonders how he would have relished and applauded recent moves and decisions in that direction!

Steve set out originally to become a doctor of medicine but dropped out to become a journalist instead being Air Correspondent for The Daily Mail when in particular he reported on the Suez Crisis and consequently travelled widely. He created the London to Paris Air Race and wrote on a wide variety of topics including fighting vehicles. He was the editor of Janes periodicals. Subsequently he became involved in the Travel Industry where his writing skills were highly valued, and he continued to author travel brochures even after he had retired. Before coming down to the West Country Steve designed and built a house for himself and Iris near London. This received wide publicity in the 60's due to its innovative design. Then they renovated a cottage near Tiverton before finally settling in Docton Mill at Hartland in about 1980. They both laboured long and hard to make the important gardens there in an eight acre wilderness. They planted over 1500 trees. Steve's final effort was to plant a substantial Magnolia Garden there to commemorate Iris who had died in 1999. Steve then moved to a small house near Bideford where he continued to entertain with his usual exuberance and generosity. When old age crept on he finally moved to Southampton to be nearer his family.

Steve's life was celebrated with a humanist wake at The Cedars near Barnstaple on the 20<sup>th</sup> of February and our most sincere condolences go out to his daughter Janet to whom we are also most grateful for information about her father.

**John Carter and Trevor Wood**

## MORE FERN INFORMATION FROM BEFORE THE WILDLIFE AND COUNTRYSIDE ACT 1981

I was interested in Trevor Wood's *clippings* about the "Fern Stealers" who, perhaps, should have been joined by very large numbers of late 19th century and early 20th century fern collectors, particularly those who followed the advice of the prolific garden and natural history author, Francis George Heath, who lived at Silverton. In his book *'The Fern World'*, which ran into twelve editions, he gave the following advice in Chapter II on fern collecting:

"But here we purpose not to recapitulate the fresh delights of Fern collecting, but to give the collector such needful suggestions, and offer such careful guidance as may be of service in the practical pursuit of one of the most delightful of occupations".

"Where a fern-collecting tour is decided on, the collector should be provided with a small garden fork, a stout chisel, a hammer, a strong clasp knife, a trowel, and a covered basket - made either of rush or wicker - or other receptacle for carrying the Ferns. Should it be determined to hunt for very large specimens, it would be necessary to add a spade to the

implements named. But in such a case special means of conveyance would need to be provided from some point, as near as possible to the locality from which the Ferns are to be taken; and indeed such a conveyance would be desirable whenever Fern hunting on a large scale is to be indulged in. In an ordinary way, however, it would be found that the implements - such as a trowel, chisel, and hammer &c. - needed for removing from their habitats the smaller and rarer of, for instance, our native Ferns, could be conveniently carried in a small tourist's bag, slung on the back of the pedestrian collector, and in the same convenient way it would be found possible by careful packing to carry a good number of plants”.

It is surprising that there are any ferns left in Devon!

Charles Lyte

## RUSCUS ERRORS AND FEED BACK

I did not read my article thoroughly on *Ruscus* which was in the last issue and two major errors occurred. The picture by my former colleague Vlasta Jamnicky should have been captioned *Ruscus hypoglossum*, I made the same mistake in an article I wrote for *Plant Heritage* 7(2) 13-15 (2000). So for clarity I repeat the photo below as it shows the best of the soft foliage species. I also changed the cover picture without changing the caption which should have read *R. colchicus* (male).

Howard Wills sent me a picture of a garden plant in Madeira. It was of *R. hypophyllum*, the species found in north Africa. It did not previously know it was cultivated on Madeira.

Carolyn Keep sent some details about the historical cultivation of *Semele*, the climbing *Ruscus* relative, outside at Kingswear. There is also a plant behind the Alpine House at Rosemoor but it is rather too cold for it to thrive. My own is pot grown and has moved outside for the summer

David Cann



An advertisement for Pennard Plants. At the top, the logo reads "Pennard Plants" in a stylized font, with "GROWING THE DREAM" underneath. Below the logo is a black and white illustration of a garden with a stone wall, a path, and various plants. The text below the illustration provides contact information: "The Walled Gardens", "East Pennard, Somerset BA4 6TU", "Tel: 01749 860039", and "Web site: www.pennardplants.com". There is a handwritten signature below the text. At the bottom, it says "Open Wednesdays 10am to 4pm March to October".

## HARDY OR WHAT?

This Winter! As I look out of the window I can see the 30cm of snow on the Haldon Hills whereas we had 2mm in our garden and it did not settle. It is supposed to be the coldest for 10 years. But in Exmouth which is fairly mild anyway (I am often accused of living in the banana belt), it goes a lot further back than that. Parts of higher Exmouth were reputed to drop to minus 9.5 degrees, absolutely unheard of for decades, although interestingly we had frogs spawn in our little pond in the first week of January. I would go as far as saying that it is possibly the worst frost for at least 30 odd years. In the past our frosts have seen a skim of ice on pails of water and a slight hardening of the surface of pots, but these have mostly dissipated by midday. But this year we have had more frosts, they have been more severe, and they have hung around longer. The one good thing about frosts is that seed germination, especially of alpines, is enhanced, as well as hopefully killing off a few “nasties”. The bad thing about frost is that it tends to kill those less than hardy plants we cherish. When you do not experience severe cold, you tend to be lulled into a false sense of horticultural bliss, and blithely set about planting all kinds of tender plants in the belief that “it won’t happen to you”. But what I have found amazing this year is the number of plants which have survived these conditions here. A gardener used to publish an article on what was in flower in his garden on Christmas Day. I have missed this by a month (I’m writing this at the end of January and beginning of February), and will mention those plants, not necessarily in flower, which are still alive outside although usually considered half hardy or tender. Regarding hardiness, some plants are cold hardy but not wet hardy, others abhor the combination.

The *Lampranthus*. African. Huge plants over 100cm across, always smothered in flower in summer, in fact it is difficult to see foliage when in full bloom. We have a good mixture of colours in the flowers (red, pink, orange, mauve, purple, white) which are a full 5cm across. The ones protected by the house are looking better than those in the open garden but sale plants in 8cm pots kept outside are still looking good. Cuttings root within 3 weeks so it is easily kept going.

*Pelargonium*. Up against the wall of the house, these have survived outside, among them being ‘Pride of Exmouth’ (an intense red double with an interesting history), ‘Apple Blossom Rosebud’ (a pinky double) and the Devon plant, ‘Lady Plymouth’. Growing in pots, some of these are well established plants up to 100cm high. I take cuttings, which are incredibly easy, and keep a few under glass, just to make sure but I left the others out with so far no ill effect.

*Dimorphotheca*. Yet another African. These usually survive a mild winter here and elsewhere, but ours is right out in the middle of the garden and has taken all of the frosts. A *Euryops acraeus*, another South African with glaucous foliage and bright yellow daisy flowers, was planted out on a raised bed, and this has had droopy leaves, but healthy stems.

*Helichrysum bracteatum* (probably now *Xerochrysum* - the *Helichrysum* genus has been split into many separate parts). It was looking untouched up to a fortnight ago, but has now taken on a rather sad appearance. I should have taken some cuttings as insurance. Hopefully it will recover. *Cycas revoluta*, two in pots. From southern Japan, the leaves have been touched and gone brown at the tips but otherwise they are looking healthy enough. We have had them for several years outside without trouble. Do bear in mind that the sap of this cycad is very poisonous to animals. The fronds on *Dicksonia antarctica*, the Australian and Tasmanian tree fern, planted in an open moist humusy border, are also very green and healthy, even though I do not cover the centre as often recommended. The poor old banana in a pot, probably the reasonably hardy Japanese *Musa basjoo*, has lost all its leaves which have gone mushy, but the trunk appears solid, so should survive. Belatedly I have put it under an outdoor bench which will give it some protection until the weather improves. Two silver leaf sub-shrubs also survived, rather surprisingly. *Santolina chamaecyparissus* ssp. *magonica*, supposedly a diploid form from Spain, has never looked back after being repotted last summer, while another Australian, the white flowered *Westringia fruticosa* ‘Smokie’ is also looking good, again having been potted up last summer. I got both of these from Dr. Keith Lever of Aberconwy Nursery in North Wales.



The most impressive plant surviving untouched has been the New Zealand *Clianthus puniceus*, the Lobster Claw or Parrot Beak. Green and healthy and 2.5m high by 4m across, it is just starting to flower and will continue for months. The seedlings I potted up for sale have also survived, even though in 9cm pots and exposed. I have just acquired the white form which is also going well but probably will not flower this year, having only been planted out in late Autumn. I am going to plant the red and white forms together so that the branches intermingle. The flowering display should be interesting as should the resultant seedlings. The seed pods are as big as culinary pea pods but the seeds are comparatively quite small. Not hardy everywhere in England but not too much trouble in Devon, as are the *Leptospermum*, a 2.5m high double red even having odd flowers open on Christmas Day. The bottle brushes *Callistemon* and *Melaleuca* are very reliable here too, never being touched by frost. The bottle brushes are quite a feature here in Exmouth, many streets being adorned by the impressive red flowers.

The same with acacias. As I type, I can see a 15m tree in the garden opposite already covered in its yellow flowers. I have several potted up in 8cm pots and left outside which are still alive. Those members who are familiar with our garden will know that it is not that big and that most seedlings, once potted up, have to be left outside to take their chances, as we do not have sufficient cover for them all.

Regarding climbers, the Chilean *Lapageria rosea* var. *albaflora* and *Philesia magellanica* are planted in a north facing border against a fence. Both have survived all the bad weather we have had, looking healthy with little sign of frost damage. I have not seen either of them flower yet as they are not mature enough, but the *Lapageria* is growing beside and up, a *Pandorea pandorana* which has flowered in the past. This latter climber comes from Australia, New Guinea and the South Sea islands, the last plant you would expect to survive. It is looking a bit 'beaten up' (the way I used to look after rugby matches), but there are green stems on it so fingers crossed.

But one plant which is looking sad is the fantastic pink starburst flowered *Justicia carnea* 'King's Crown'. Once called *Jacobinia*, it comes from tropical and sub-tropical areas of the Americas and is described as an evergreen shrub. Well, not this winter! I notice that all the leaves have gone black BUT there are green shoots so it should survive. It is slightly protected by growing underneath the *Clianthus*.

How about bulbs? *Ornithogalum longibracteatum*, nicknamed the 'Pregnant Onion' because of its habit of producing offsets under the outer skin and halfway up the bulb, comes from the Natal region. The word 'pregnant' describes this bulb well, as I think it must have been fed multi-birth pills instead of fertiliser. Normally I keep my more tender South African bulbs in the greenhouse but as I have so many of these, I left a few outside. It is similar to the *Hippeastrum* in that it sits on the soil surface. The long strap-like leaves suffered a bit, going rather mushy, but the bulbs themselves, up to 12cm across, seem solid and plump. Other Africans such as *Amaryllis belladonna*, *Crinum x powellii*, *Crinum moorei*, *Nerine*, *Eucomis*, *Sparaxis*, *Gladiolus*, *Ixia*, *Chasmanthe*, *Anomatheca*, *Homeria*, *Schizostylis*, *Tritonia* and *Dierama* take anything this climate can throw at them, as do the Asiatic *Hedychium*. I have always found the *Rhodohypoxis* hardy here outdoors, and although safely tucked away underground at the moment in the rock garden and troughs, I have no doubt that they will rear their pretty little heads in due time. Those in pots, covered with netting are already showing signs of growth.

*Xerophyta viscosa*, another African, is called the "Resurrection Plant" for its ability to withstand drought (not that it had a problem in this respect last year). Scientists are studying this ability to survive without water in the hope that it can be adapted for food crops in drought ridden areas. This has been outside ever since I grew it from seed.

*Agapanthus* are never a problem. These Africans survive outside quite easily, as I think they

probably do throughout the South of England. I try to grow as many of the dwarf varieties as possible, mostly bought from the specialist nurseryman Dick Fulcher of Pine Cottage Plants (see ad in *Plant Heritage*), and they are usually semi-evergreen in our garden. My favourite is *Agapanthus* 'Double Diamond', which I believe is a dwarf double white form of *Agapanthus praecox* ssp. *minimus*. Other dwarf *Agapanthus* (up to 50cm, often less) which survive outside are 'Tinkerbelle', 'Peter Pan', 'Snowball', 'Thumbelina' and 'Silver Baby'. Our *Echeveria* were terrible. Normally reliable outside if near the house, those planted in soil at the base of the walls had no problems, whereas the ones in pots collapsed. On inspection this was not the winter, it was the vine weevil. Luckily they are easily propagated by their leaves, which are still healthy. Rather bizarrely, some rosettes are just sitting, seemingly healthy, on top of their pots without roots, presumably waiting for me to place them on top of good soil where they can put out new roots. Other succulents which rather surprisingly have withstood the vagaries of the winter outside are some of the *Delosperma*, *Berberanthus* and *Khadia* species.

We only have one cactus outside, *Maihueunia poeppigii* on a raised alpine bed. I grew this from John Watson seed, which coming from a high altitude in the Chilean Andes was stated as probably hardy. Hardy from cold, yes. Hardy from cold and wet, doubtful. It has survived three years outside, but not happily, and at the moment there are still some solid stems. I know it will live, but won't be too pleased with me for keeping it outside.

How about a *Bougainvillea*? We have always failed with these even when they are kept in an unheated glasshouse. So having bought three last year, I decided to put the smallest one out. The others are in the heated greenhouse and surviving!! I chose what I thought would be the best spot, against a fence facing South, under a conifer and under a 3m high *Cestrum* 'Newellii' (Mexico) where *Dregea sinensis* also grows. I then built a little shelter around it in rocks. It has lost all its leaves but as it is only 15cm high, I cannot tell whether it is still alive or not. Time will tell. Similarly with a *Jacaranda*, which is in a pot under the same conifer. It has lost its leaves but I live in hope that healthy buds will emerge at a later date.

Abutilons, members of the Malvaceae are fine here, not suffering much damage and *Abutilon megapotamicum* 'Variegatum', out in the open garden, actually had flowers out on Christmas Day and is still flowering as I write. The two larger flowered forms, up to 2m high, one orange and one yellow, are fine also, although not flowering during the winter months.

Some plants defy me to get near them but looking at them from a safe distance, I see that *Agave americana* 'Variegatum' with its yellow and green striped leaves is still perfect. The other one which frightens me is *Puya chilensis*, a really vicious beast which can rip flesh if you are not careful, which has a green centre although the outer leaves are brown and damaged. Serves it right for the pain it has caused me in the past.

I have a particular interest in rock plants. Many alpine plants are usually not damaged by cold, often surviving as they do at a constant low temperature below snow. What they do dislike is excessive wet, especially on the foliage, and the regular changes of temperature and stop/start growing conditions experienced in this county. I have been gratified to see that some of those that I have considered as difficult are still with me on the rock gardens. *Clematis marmoraria*, a 10cm shrub from New Zealand, *Helichrysum pagophilum* and *H. sessilioides*, silver cushion plants from southern Africa, *Helichrysum arvae*, a silver mat from the Yemen, *Eriogonum ovalifolium* (North America), the aromatic *Thymus camphoratus* (Portugal), *Teucrium aroanium* (Southern Greece), *Eryngium glaciale*, a miniature 10cm high sea holly from Spain, *Origanum amanum* (Turkey) and the hairy *O. dictamnus* (Crete), *Oreomyrrhis argentea* (Eastern Australia), so the list goes on. I am sure that some of you are muttering, "What's he talking about, we grow all these outside without any trouble". I am sure that members in Cornwall have even more survivors than I do, whereas when visitors have come here from the Midlands, they often say, "Oh, we cannot grow that outside where we are". Any part of any garden in any county could have a microclimate where difficult plants survive. These are just some of the plants we grow outside, whereas I have lost some of what I would consider as hardier plants under glass. But that's another story...

**Roger Stuckey**

# TWO RARE & UNUSUAL PLANTS THAT PROBABLY DON'T FIGURE IN NATIONAL COLLECTIONS

## *Narcissus pseudonarcissus* and *Umbilicus rupestris*

During the course of our gardening activities we often find or get given plants that surely fall into the category we loosely call treasures. Sometimes they do get into Collections because that is what Collectors do, but often they just don't, and I wonder if our conservation effort in the NCCPG fails to accommodate the ones that don't.

In the nineteen eighties Roger Hoskin discovered a wonderful double wild daffodil in north west Devon and gave me a bulb. After a year or two our plant flowered and its bloom proved to be a charming and perfectly symmetrical thing, unlike so many double daffodils which though interesting, are really rather messy to look at. I am actually very ignorant on the topic of daffodils and Roger's bulb was left alone to increase naturally in a place devoted to wild flowers where it gave us pleasure every year. It wasn't until a chance visit by experts in 2004 that we realised the true importance of Roger Hoskin's find. The experts went wild with excitement on catching sight of it. It is actually the best and most symmetrical double wild narcissus (*Narcissus pseudonarcissus*) ever discovered as far as current opinion is able to decide. You will all be glad to know that we were able to let well qualified people have several bulbs which are being propagated properly and skilfully and it looks as though the plant is safe and increasing well.



The second plant is a pennywort or navelwort (*Umbilicus rupestris*) which my wife saw whilst we were out on the way to Lydford Forest exercising our whippets in 2007 (below). The translucent white rim to the leaf makes the whole plant look as though it has been carved out of some semiprecious stone by a Chinese craftsman. Pennywort, whilst naturally



spreading strongly from its own seed is a devil to propagate by division. It is unlikely that the plant will come true from seed and once again we have had recourse to better talent in this direction than we have. We keep our hands crossed! We remember the fate of a variegated foxglove my wife found whilst out riding. At that time we consulted two experts. One said "As the plant is biennial you should take seed and trust to luck", the other said "Forget the flower, cut the plant back to an inch above the base and it will make offsets". We took the latter course and the plant died with scarcely a whimper!

**John Carter**

## AREA EVENTS 2009

All events in each area are open to members and members' guests. Charges (including tea and cakes) except where otherwise stated: members £3 per day and members' guests £4. All events will take place whatever the weather. May we ask you to respect the owners' privacy and not enter before the time specified.

### EAST DEVON

Area Co-ordinator: Diane Rowe, Orchard House, Parsonage Farm, Uffculme EX15 3DR  
Tel. 01884 840545 Email: [diane@orchard-house.demon.co.uk](mailto:diane@orchard-house.demon.co.uk)

### NORTH DEVON

Area Co-ordinator: Mrs Margaret Jewell, The Croft, Yarnscombe, Barnstaple EX31 3LW  
Tel.: 01769 560535

### SOUTH AND WEST DEVON

Area Co-ordinators: Jan & Rob Wagstaff, North Boreston, Halwell, Totnes TQ9 7LD  
Tel: 01548 821320 Email: [borestongarden@btinternet.com](mailto:borestongarden@btinternet.com)

### Friday 1 May

2.30 pm

*Directions*

### VISIT TO THORN HOUSE, NR WEMBURY PL9 0EQ

Contact: Jan & Rob Wagstaff, BOOKING NOT NECESSARY

By kind permission of Drs J D & E Gibson. The present garden owes its origin to Thomas Lockyer, Mayor of Plymouth, who moved to Thorn in 1804. Much of the stuary & formal garden was added by a later owner, William Arkwright, in the 1920s. The 9 acres of garden now include formal areas with roses & lavenders near the house, but the main areas of the garden still hold an impressive collection of trees & shrubs from the great plant-hunting days. These include rhododendrons, camellias, magnolias, Cornus, Luma, Pittosporum, rare Quercus & huge Monterey pines. Many of the examples are champion trees. In addition to this wealth of horticultural history the garden offers fantastic views of the Yealm estuary & carpets of bluebells. Teas & plant sales.

Take the A 379 Kingsbridge to Plymouth road towards Plymouth & continue until the village of Brixton. Go through Brixton & take a L turn at Chittleburn Cross signed Garden Centre (Otter Nurseries) & Brixton Tor. Follow this road for 1.3 miles until cross roads with more major road (cemetery on R at junction). Turn L signed Knighton & Wembury. Continue on this road for 1.4 miles to outskirts of Wembury. Where road turns sharply R into village go straight on (Pilgrims' Rest campsite on L). NCCPG signs from here. In about half mile turn L to Thorn on private road.

## Tuesday 16 June

11 am

*Directions*

*lunch*

2 pm

*Directions*

*Cost*

## BRUSHFORD BARTON & LOWER BRAGGAMARSH HOUSE

Contact: Margaret Jewel, BOOKING NECESSARY

**Brushford Barton** by kind invitation of A & R Holland. See “Two North Devon Gardens” page 17.

From the A377 at Eggesford Station cross the level crossing & go straight up the hill, passing Eggesford Garden Centre. Follow signs for Brushford for about 3 miles. About half a mile down a hill turn L by a post box & follow the lane. Pass the church entrance & take the central track between stone gate posts.

12:30 Buffet lunch provided by the W.I. in the Threshing Barn. **Lower Braggamarsh House** by kind invitation of Jane & Alex Gibson.

From Brushford return to Eggesford Station & turn L on to the A377 towards Barnstaple. Pass Kings Nympton station & after about 3 miles turn L at the Porstmouth Arms Sawmills. Proceed up the hill towards Burrington. First L & follow the NCCPG signs. Lower Braggamarsh is the second property on the R.

£10.00 Contact Margaret Jewel 01769 560 535. Booking essential. Cheques payable to “Devon NCCPG”.

## Thursday 18 June

2.30 pm

*Directions*

## VISIT TO ASH HOUSE FARM, ASH NR DARTMOUTH, TQ6 0LR

Contact: Jan & Rob Wagstaff - BOOKING NOT NECESSARY  
By kind permission of Roger & Jane Davenport. This garden of 12 acres has been developed over the last 10 years around an old farmstead. It is extremely varied & the approaches to the different areas add greatly to the interest & sense of excitement in exploring the garden as a whole. Areas include a bog garden & ponds, a fantastic wild flower meadow, arboretum, vegetable gardens, masses of roses & much more. Sculptures, some conventional & some very unusual, add to the interest. Teas & plant sales.

Take the A3122, Halwell to Dartmouth road from Totnes Cross garage. After 4 miles, turn R just before ‘The Sportsman’s Arms’ signed Bugford, Hillfield & Ash. NCCPG signs from here. Continue to T junction (0.7 miles) & turn R signed Hillfield, Ash & Cottesbury. Almost immediately turn L to Ash & Bowden. Continue on to Ash Cross & go straight over cross roads; pass Ash Tree Farm nursery on L; in about 500 yards turn L into car park.

## Friday 26 June

11 am

*Directions*

*Lunch*

## HILLRISE AND YONDER HILL

**Hillrise, 24 Windsor Mead, Sidford, Sidmouth**, Mr & Mrs Robertshaw. A plant lover’s garden on a south facing slope with sea & countryside views. Themed borders include shrubs, perennials, grasses, woodland, ferns, dahlias & cannas.

Take A3052 from Newton Poppleford, pass The Bowd pub & then Sidmouth Garden Centre, continue on & Windsor Mead is on L. Follow NCCPG signs. Limited parking.

Sidmouth Garden Centre. **PTO**.

2.30 pm **Yonder Hill, Colaton Raleigh**, Judy McKay & Eddie Stevenson. 3 acres of unconventional planting. Shady walks, sunny glades, young woodland, ponds, herbaceous borders, orchard, vegetables, wildlife areas including large pond. Several collections, many surprises. Unusual plants for sale. Coffee, tea & biscuits in rest room.

*Directions* On B3178 between Newton Poppleford & Colaton Raleigh, take turning signed to Dotton, then immediate R into small lane.

*Cost* £5 for the day. Contact Helen Brown on 01404 850941.

### Sunday 12 July

#### **SUMMER LUNCH AT BROOK, EAST CORNWORTHY, TQ9 7HQ**

BOOKING ESSENTIAL - Contact Edwina Pickard, details below.

12.30 pm onwards By kind permission of Peter & Bee Smyth. This beautifully designed & maintained garden of three acres provides an ideal setting for a leisurely summer lunch. The level garden has been cleverly designed to incorporate formal areas near the house with terrace with raised fish ponds, colourful herbaceous borders & rose walks. Beyond are many specimen trees & shrubs. The garden is bordered by a stream, with pond & bog garden. Plant sales, drinks & lunch. Please send SAE for tickets (£12.50 members & guests) to Mrs Edwina Pickard, 11 Peter's Close, Elburton, Plymouth PL9 8NU. Cheques made payable to NCCPG Devon Group.

*Directions* Take A3122 Halwell to Dartmouth road from Totnes Cross garage & continue to 'The Sportsman's Arms'. Turn L signed Capton & Dittisham & continue into Dittisham village. Pass the 'Red Lion' on R & take road signed Coombe & Cornworthy. NCCPG signs from here. Continue for about 1.5 miles, pass Brook on L & continue on to Toad Hall (100 yards) on L for parking.

### Monday 3 August

#### **VISIT TO AVENUE COTTAGE, ASHPRINGTON TQ9 7UT**

2.30 pm Contact: Jan & Rob Wagstaff, BOOKING NOT NECESSARY By kind permission of Richard Pitts. The 7 acre gardens around Avenue Cottage were originally part of the Sharpham estate, which was divided up in 1940. The property has been owned by a series of keen gardeners who have contributed to the wealth of plants, but by the time Richard Pitts bought it in 1987 some of it had become an impenetrable jungle of laurel & sycamore. Much has now been cleared, opening up lovely views of Sharpham House & the River Dart. This clearing has allowed many specimen plants to develop & mixed with newer plantings of hydrangeas, produces a lovely woodland garden. Many other unusual trees & shrubs abound. Teas & plant sales.

*Directions* From Totnes take A 381 towards Kingsbridge. On outskirts of Totnes fork L & follow road signs to Ashprington. In Ashprington village turn L up past church & follow NCCPG signs to car park.

## Friday 28 August

### **LITTLE ASH BUNGALOW & CADHAY HOUSE BOOKING ESSENTIAL**

11 am **Little Ash Bungalow, Fenny Bridges, Honiton** Helen & Brian Brown. A plantaholic's garden designed for year round interest, with mixed borders of many different & unusual perennials, shrubs, bamboos & trees. Bring & buy plant stall.

*Directions* From Exeter, leave A30 at Patteson's Cross exit, signed for Feniton & Fenny Bridges. At end of slip road turn R, up to T junction & turn L for Fenny Bridges. Follow NCCPG signs. Please park in the lane.

*Lunch 12.30* **Cadhay House, Ottery St Mary**, joined by Dave & Alison the gardeners. Listed by Country Life magazine as one of the top manor houses in the country, the Elizabethan Cadhay House also has gardens that are worth more than just a passing visit. Superb herbaceous borders lead to the lake. You may wish to take a one hour house tour for an extra charge of £4.

*Cost* £8 to include Garden Tour, morning coffee & a cold lunch. Contact Helen Brown on 01404 850941.

## Tuesday 8 September

### **VISIT TO HIGH GARDEN, KENTON EX6 8NJ**

**2.45 pm:** note time

Contact: Jan & Rob Wagstaff, **BOOKING NOT NECESSARY**  
By kind permission of Chris & Sharon Britton. This 5 acre site has been developed into a lovely garden with herbaceous, shrubs & trees for all seasons. The spectacular 80 yard long double herbaceous borders will be full of colour in September with heleniums, rudbeckias, aster novi-belgii, sedums & many more, all complemented with a range of unusual grasses. Model fruit & vegetable garden. The owner will lead a walk around the garden. Teas. Plant sales in the attached plantsman's nursery.

*Directions* Take A 380 Newton Abbot to Exeter road until exit signposted Mamhead, Starcross & Kenton. Take exit (which crosses over A 380) & follow road towards Mamhead, Starcross & Kenton. At first junction fork L & in a few hundred yards turn L signed Mamhead & Starcross. Continue on this road, ignoring all junctions, until L turn signed Kenton. Turn L & follow road to Kenton. Turn R opposite church to junction with major road (A379, Rodean Restaurant on corner). Turn L & in 200 yards fork left following NCCPG signs.

**Details of the following will be given in the Autumn Newsletter**

**Saturday 10 October**

**Marwood Hill Gardens** Talks by Kevin Hughes and Barry Starling

# NEWS AND EVENTS

## IS YOUR GARDEN OR NATIONAL COLLECTION OPEN THIS YEAR?

Let me know and have the dates included in the newsletter. **David Cann**, see page 2

### CLIFFE GARDEN, LEE, ILFRACOMBE

Open: 1 April – 30 September 9.00am-5.00pm 7 days a week. Admission: £3 as part of the NGS. The garden is well worth a visit with fantastic views and many areas of interest throughout the year.

### FOAMLEA GARDEN, CHAPEL HILL, MORTEHOE EX34 7DZ

Will be open as follows: Thursdays May 14th, June 11th, September 10th, 10-5. Visits on other dates by request. 01271 871182. For full details of the type of garden refer to the yellow book. It is a 5 year old, 1 acre, full maritime exposed garden, with a wide range of tropical and temperate plants on a frost-free cliff top alongside the S W Footpath. NO parking at house or on Chapel Hill: use Morteheo Car Park.

### CREDITON GARDENS OPEN FOR EXETER CANCER CHARITY FORCE

**Sunday 14 June 2-5.** Three gardens are open including the **National Collection of Ruscus** at Halbury, Golden Joy EX17 1EA, also the gardens at 6 Longmeadows and Marlew House, Old Tiverton Road. Teas & plant sales. Three different gardens, start at Halbury, then follow the signs. **David Cann**

### THE OLD VICARAGE GARDEN BERRY POMEROY TQ9 6LH

This 2-acre garden which includes a Victorian walled garden, stream, herb garden and magnificent 200 yr old copper beech will be open Sunday June 14th 2-5.30pm. Teas & plant sale. All proceeds to the bell fund Friends of St Mary's Church Berry Pomeroy reg. charity. Parking available, admission £3. **Tony Roberts**

### CLEMATIS WEEKEND 1-2 AUGUST 2009 AT RHS GARDEN ROSEMOOR

Displays of *Clematis*, pictures and information from four **Clematis National Collections**. *Clematis* plants for sale. Books and leaflets. *Clematis* workshops. See the web site [www.roselandhouse.co.uk/rosemoor.htm](http://www.roselandhouse.co.uk/rosemoor.htm)

### ARTEMISIA & NERIUM OLEANDER OPEN DAY: SUNDAY 20 SEPTEMBER 2009

see page 5.

### BOTANY GROUP IN DEVON

If you are interested in Botany in Devon then why not join the Devonshire Association Botany Section. We are a group of amateurs and professionals who all share an interest in wild plants, conservation and recording our natural history. Throughout the year we have a series of field meetings where you can learn and record at whatever level suits you. Complete beginners, children with families, visitors, all are welcome. Please contact Dr. Frances Billinge, Hon. Secretary [fbillinge@btinternet.com](mailto:fbillinge@btinternet.com) 01626 833620

### MEMBERSHIP NEWS

Members who have provided a mailing address will have had an email from me. Anyone who did not receive the email but wants to be included needs to **email** the membership manager Sue Cox see p. 2, including in the body of the email your correct postal address and membership number so the email address can be matched to the correct entry. We can then send things by email. I had many emails bounce back as undeliverable. **David Cann**



## TWO NORTH DEVON GARDENS

The announcement of our new title “Plant Heritage” reminded me that part of the mission brief was for conservation of gardens and the coming visit to two North Devon properties highlights the “care” aspect by the present owners of these differing gardens. The change in usage from a working farm to today’s leisure gardens has been made to suit the incumbent requirements, sympathetically working with existing features and mindful of the history attached. I found the details engrossing and hopefully will encourage you to visit in June.

**Brushford Barton** stands 400 ft above sea level on an exposed south-facing site with extensive views across the Taw valley to Dartmoor. The landscape has developed over thousands of years. This section of the Taw formed part of western-most boundary of the Roman Empire, with a chain of forts along the bank. The earthworks of one such are still visible by the river at Brushford.

According to the listing documentation, Brushford Barton is probably the largest cob house in England. It has been extended and altered many times. The oldest parts date from the 16th century; the main front was rebuilt in classic Regency style in the early 19th century using cob and with stone portico, sills and lintels from the Dartmoor prison quarries. There is circumstantial evidence to suggest the architect may have been Thomas Lee of Barnstaple, a pupil of Sir John Soane, who at the time was building the nearby Eggesford House for the Earl of Portsmouth. The house forms part of the south side of a courtyard, originally the farmyard, which is entirely enclosed with walls and a variety of other buildings. Several of these are separately listed Grade II.

**The Gardens and Grounds** extend to about 7 acres of which about 1.5 are now gardened. It is sheltered from the north by the hill rising behind and from the north-west by a belt of trees but from all other directions, the site is open to the winds. The soil, a thin layer over shillet, is mainly neutral.

The gardens have been developed gradually as the building renovations progressed. There was no initial master plan, rather the design emerged as a compromise to achieve some basic goals within the practical constraints. Key goals included converting a run down farmstead into the more formal setting appropriate to the Regency-style frontage, exploiting the outstanding views and providing a safe environment where the collection of ornamental waterfowl, which arrived with the owners, could be enjoyed to the full. Examples of the practicalities were the need to create gardens that could be managed without employing regular gardening staff and the presence, just below the surface, of granite outcrops that would require gelnite or more to remove.

Several measures have enhanced the setting at the front. Forty or so trees have been planted to soften the open bleakness and to provide, in time, a more parkland type of setting. The driveway in the central section of the building frontage has been built out into a forecourt, substituting in the process the fencing with a ha-ha. The old slurry pond has been enlarged into a small lake taking the eye towards the views of Dartmoor some twelve miles distant. To either side of the house, what were tiny front gardens for two cottages have been cleared. Behind their castellated walls, one provides space primarily for lilies; the other is planted with modern roses.

The main garden area is the courtyard, which is entirely enclosed by the house and the old farm buildings. Originally, this was a sloping fold yard, the skim of soil over shillet providing hard and well-drained standing for the cattle. The slope is still there at the sides, following the slope of the buildings but for the rest the character has been changed. Two ponds connected by rill and waterfall have provided horizontal planes and a safe environment for the waterfowl. Further horizontal areas and some formality have been introduced with steps, areas of paving, a small herb garden and, on one side, terracing and level lawns in a sunken garden reminiscent of the Italianate style.

Roses, shrubs and trees provide the majority of planting within the courtyard. Each has

required the use of a Kango drill and the importing of manure and topsoil. In June, the open-fronted linhay is covered with a variety of climbing roses. This main planting is interspersed with grasses and herbaceous varieties suited to the free-draining soil.

To the east of the buildings there is a cob-walled vegetable garden. Thankfully, much of the cob was restored and the walls capped with pantiles, a more practical solution than what was presumably the original thatch. The present owners have cleared the ground, planted one area with fruit trees and are gradually achieving a reasonable depth of soil in the other with massive quantities of manure and some raised beds. There is a cage for soft fruits. All is now in a productive state, amply feeding the household with a good variety around the year and providing surplus for neighbours and the local pub. The approach is largely organic but not slavishly so.

**R. Holland**

**Lower Braggamarsh House (Braggymarsshe as known in 1516)** is situated on a hillside facing east-south-east a short way from the south bank of the river Taw, affording views down the valley towards Kings Nympton and across steeply wooded areas and farm land towards Chittlehampton on the other side of the valley.

Gilbert Pridham Babbage was certainly resident in 1840 and he may have built the present house. The Babbages remained owners, earlier members of the family lost much of the land through gambling (in 1840 it was recorded as 36 acres) and some was sold. The house was leased or rented for some time and only the area around the house remained when the last Babbage owner returned and set about restoring the property. At this time the cladding was removed, revealing the stone walls, and conservatories were added to the north and south sides.

**The Garden** was quite extensively developed by the last owners with many ambitious plans, some of which have been simplified by the present owners to make maintenance less labour intensive on the rather thin stony soil which is borderline neutral acid and in places heavy clay. An old vegetable garden slightly raised from the entrance driveway was lawned and a Koi pond built. It lies immediately to the south of the house and is approached by a few steps, enclosed by low walling and is overlooked by a wooden pavilion. The lawned area also leads to some raised vegetable beds, a second working driveway, with a wild life pond and timber decking platform. There are also large rock features here, as well as others scattered throughout the garden, which were bought from quarries near Dolton.

Shrubs and trees backed this area and then a steep slope descending through a wild meadow orchard, containing apples, pears, plums and a rare Mazard tree takes one to the very lowest area of the property, a small stream with extensive bog plantings, a pleasant little bridge and many rhododendrons and acers. To return to the house a choice of two routes are found, both a steep climb! One, through the terraced hillside held in place by numerous stone walls and timber retainers, planted with shrubs and trees brings one back to a paved terrace and lawned area, past a small ornamental pond to out buildings, originally barns and hayloft, supporting a vine and Virginia creeper over the garage, and roses. On the multi level terraces are many containers including a large and dramatic old olive tree. In front of these the lawn leads to a small timber and tiled Summerhouse allowing views to the surrounding hillsides. A timbered open topped pergola with white wisterias and yellow roses passes another barn also supporting climbers, leads back onto the working driveway backed by herbaceous border against the old stone wall supporting the area first mentioned, and so returns to the house.

A second pathway from the stream garden returns past a small quarry area full of species rhododendrons and camellias and up steeply timbered steps through a small glade of silver birch, under planted with bluebells and daffodils leading to more wild grassland with mown pathways, scattered rocks and wooden seats. Eventually one regains the level areas in front of the house with a large stone monolith (Mrs Henry Moore!). The house frontage again is wreathed in climbing roses and *Clematis montana*, at the north end is another small ornamental pond and to the west a small patch of lawn with two old oaks. From this area one has beautiful views of the Taw Valley and the hillsides looking down on to farmland and the river with the Tarka Line Railway running alongside See events pages for details.

**John Smith**

# DEVON'S PLANTSPEOPLE

The second article in this series looks at the contributions of one Devon NCCPG member to the specialised world of plant breeding and hybridisation. You may know the face, particularly those of you who frequent the NCCPG plant sales in Tavistock and Totnes. She can be seen selling plants on one of the regular stalls and many of you will have benefitted from her advice. Some of you will know the name but it is likely that far fewer of you will have realised that she is an eminent plant geneticist with a lifetime of experience in hybridising and breeding plants: she is Dr Marion Wood.

## DR MARION WOOD Early life and career

Born Marion Nancarrow in Plymouth she grew up in a scientifically oriented family which obviously had an effect on her as she soon developed an enquiring mind and an experimental streak. She remembers that, at the age of 7, she heard a programme on the radio about plant grafting. Out into the garden and with bandages from the first aid cupboard and clay she performed her first plant graft – a nasturtium stem onto a delphinium root! Later experiments were to prove more successful.

Her childhood was spent between London, where she attended the North London Collegiate School, Plymouth and the Brecon Beacons where she was evacuated during war time bombings. Marion then studied for a Botany degree at Royal Holloway College, London. Following that she lectured in plant cytology and genetics, whilst undertaking research for her PhD. She also helped lay out the college Botanic Garden ordering plants from the Chelsea Physic Garden. It was during this period in the early 1950s that Marion met, was tutored by and inspired by a Dr Janaki Ammal, a world renowned plant geneticist. At this time Dr Ammal was based at Wisley though she later returned to India to mastermind the development of national research programmes in the developing university system. The work of Dr Ammal in plant breeding will be referred to later in this article.

Now Dr Nancarrow, Marion met and married a fellow research student, and as Marion Wood, moved to Harlow New Town. Her career took quite a different turn, from the peace of the lecture room and laboratories of a university to the hurly burly of science teaching in secondary schools in the various new town developments on the Essex side of London. Her teaching skills were well developed and are noticeable to this day as you listen to her explaining quite complex concepts. Marion stayed in the school sector until she retired in 1988, continuing her research, plant hybridising and plant breeding privately in her out of work life.

The move to Harlow was to a house in a field called Little Ouse on a very wet ¼ acre. The enquiring, experimental mind but essentially practical nature of Marion led her to develop an interest in breeding beardless irises suitable for such conditions. She met Tomas Tamberg who worked on interspecific crosses (more of this later) and whose nursery in Germany is still one of the leading suppliers of irises



today. Following his example but using a very different approach, Marion successfully bred Calsibe irises, crosses between *Iris chrysographes* and the Pacific Coast irises. She registered two of them as *Iris* 'Wembury Sophie' and *Iris* 'Wembury Frances', after her two daughters.

Marion also developed an interest in alpinas and nerines and brought her collection with her when she retired back to the Plymouth area about 20 years ago. In the warm damp south west her alpinas got rust and mouldered away but her nerines flourished. She created a plantswoman's garden from a ½ acre grass plot; she became an active NCCPG member and a stalwart of our local propagating group. She worked with many local plantsmen and women, inspiring one of them to name one of his new crocosmias, *Crocasmia* 'Doctor Marion Wood' (in the Plant Finder).

Her breeding experiments continued. After dallying with the crossing of hellebores and breeding crocosmias she became obsessed, her own description, with breeding new colours of hardy *Nerine*, particularly scarlet. She has worked with the late Terry Jones in the past and is currently working with Matt Bishop, two gardeners who shared her goal.

### **Marion's work in breeding *Nerine***

Marion was keen to cross *Nerine bowdenii* with *N. sarniensis*, both of which have the same number of chromosomes ( $2n = 22$ ) in each cell.

Chromosomes are the long DNA molecules, lengths of which are the genes which influence the plant's characteristics. Flowering plants have 2 sets of chromosomes in each cell of the plant body: this is known as the diploid form. For example the buttercup, *Ranunculus acris*, has 14 chromosomes in its cell nuclei organised as 2 sets of 7 ( $2n = 14$ ); *Iris chrysographes* has 40 chromosomes in 2 sets of 20 ( $2n = 40$ ).

When the plant is ready to reproduce sexually a process (meiosis) occurs where diploid cells in the sexual organs divide to produce egg cells and pollen grains with just 1 set of chromosomes (haploid cells).

Take as an example *N. bowdenii* which has 22 chromosomes in the plant body cells: The mature plants produce haploid egg cells and pollen grains, the nuclei of which fuse on fertilisation and go on to develop into a diploid embryo plant within a seed. Thus there is a mixing of genetic material from the two parents but with maintenance of the 'normal' chromosome complement for the species. Self fertilisation also occurs in many species, including nerines, which lessens the mixing of genetic material. For the breeder wanting to cross two varieties this can be prevented by emasculating one parent's flowers.

But Marion wanted to cross two different species of *Nerine* to get characteristics from both, the hardiness from *N. bowdenii* and the flower colour range from *N. sarniensis*. *N. bowdenii* is hardy but only has the colour range of pinks, white and a few peach, whilst *N. sarniensis* is not hardy but has a colour range from crimson to scarlet to orange-red. The goal was to produce hardy nerines in the colour range of reds and oranges, as well as the vigorous growth often coming from such crosses (hybrid vigour).

Interspecific hybrids in plants are widely produced but some crosses produce fertile offspring and others sterile offspring. For example the cross between *Crocasmia aurea* and *Crocasmia potsii* produces fertile hybrids in the *Crocasmia* x *crocosmiiflora* range; whilst the cross between *Helleborus argutifolius* and *Helleborus niger* produces *Helleborus* x *nigercors* which, although a very garden worthy plant, is sterile (this sterility may not matter to the nurseryman as stock can be bulked up using vegetative methods but the plants are a breeding dead end). Where the two parent species have the same number of chromosomes there is a greater chance of fertile offspring as the pairing up of the chromosomes and the division process can work effectively.

As both *N. bowdenii* and *N. sarniensis* have 22 chromosomes there was good potential for fertile offspring. Marion's first crosses produced vigorous young plants which were grown on to flowering (up to four years). The flower colours were all disappointing; desirable characteristics often skip a generation and it is usually only by pursuing a breeding line for several generations that the goal can be reached. But these first crosses were sterile; as Marion put it "the chromosomes from the two species did not like each other, they did not pair up properly, and cell division to produce the pollen and egg cells didn't work well". So she decided to use an unusual and very specialised technique to move forwards; to use a polyploid form of a *Nerine* as one parent in new first generation crosses.

Polyploid forms of plants do occur naturally in some species, the cells having multiple sets of chromosomes; not the two sets of the "normal" diploid form. They can be triploid (3 sets), tetraploid (4 sets), octaploid (8 sets) etc. For example some primulas, orchids and camellias (particularly *C. reticulata*) have natural polyploid forms. Polyploid plants are of considerable significance to the gardener, often they

have bigger individual cells with a higher water content so they are vigorous growers developing into larger forms of the plant (but this can mean they are less frost resistant)

have certain organs that are bigger, e.g. thicker leaves, larger petals (because of the bigger cells)

are very prolific flowerers with a longer flowering period.

Characteristics we value in our gardens, at least in the mild South West.

Marion wanted to try pollen from a triploid form of *N. sarniensis* but triploids are only rarely known to occur naturally in nerines so she turned to work done by her old mentor Dr Janaki Ammal in 1951.



In 1935 in the USA experiments had been done using colchicine, a substance extracted from *Colchicum autumnale*, applied to the growing tip of very young seedlings. The result was that the seedling changed from its normal diploid form (2n) to a plant with multiple sets of chromosomes, thus the first artificial polyploid was created. Dr Ammal built on this work in the 1950s at Wisley. She applied colchicine to young seedlings of *Magnolia kobus*; the resulting plants had double the number of chromosomes per cell (tetraploid), had thicker leaves, were very floriferous with strong flowers and flowered for long periods. One of the best plants, *Magnolia kobus* 'Norman Gould' is still grown in gardens today and is truly spectacular. Dr Ammal also counted the chromosome numbers of many *Nerine* cultivars, and found that several were triploid or had a few extra chromosomes. These two pieces of work informed Marion's next breeding experiments.

Her own created triploid form (3n) of *N. sarniensis* produced pollen grains with a varying number of chromosomes, few of which were fertile, typical of triploids because normal cell division does not work properly. But the pollen was applied to the stigma in *N. bowdenii* (whose own stamens had been removed) and a limited number of viable progeny were produced. These were grown on to sexual maturity, still with disappointing flowers but at least with some that were pollen fertile, unlike the sterile first crosses she had produced before. Marion now had hybrids of *N. bowdenii* and *N. sarniensis* which produced a limited amount of fertile pollen (only about 5%) but were egg sterile. Her breeding lines had begun.

The pollen from these first crosses was used to fertilise egg cells from *N. bowdenii*, some viable progeny resulted and were grown on to flowering. This second generation had better flower colours and retained limited pollen fertility. The chromosome numbers in these plants were very variable, from 26 to 44, always a set of 11 from the *N. bowdenii* parent and a set of 11 plus extras from the hybrid parent (such plants are known as aneuploids). Sadly there isn't space in this article to look at the detail. Marion continued crossing the hybrids back to *N. bowdenii* to increase hardiness whilst retaining flower colour. She has now produced hybrids with violet, red and orange flowers which are very beautiful. The plants, all prefixed with Yealm, are in limited circulation. More needs to be done to establish the hardiness of these crosses, by the simple method of exposing them to outdoor growing conditions.

Marion had also pursued other ways of producing polyploid parents to use for breeding. In one experiment she made a first cross between 'normal' diploid forms of *N. bowdenii* and *N. sarniensis* (both parents had 22 chromosomes and produced egg and pollen cells with 11 chromosomes). The resultant hybrid seeds were treated with colchicine which killed about 95% of them, but the remainder germinated and grew into plants. Two of these plants were tetraploid with 4 sets of chromosomes, 2 sets from *N. bowdenii* and 2 sets from *N. sarniensis* i.e. 44 chromosomes in total. The nuclei of the cells were very crowded with a mass of tangled chromosomes. The plants did produce pollen cells, a tiny percentage of which were fertile, which could be used for further crossing.

Another approach started with Marion's observation that the bulbs of *N. bowdenii* and *N. sarniensis* which had been stored in very hot dry conditions (i.e. bad conditions) behaved rather differently when grown on and crossed. Her research showed that the heat treated bulbs grew into plants which produced egg cells with 11 chromosomes but pollen cells with 11, 22 or 33 chromosomes some of which were fertile. When this pollen from *N. sarniensis* was used to fertilise egg cells from *N. bowdenii* most of the resultant offspring plants were polyploid and very vigorous, with darker green leaves than normal and tall, large flowers. More work is needed on this as the approach could produce some interesting plants.

To date the first method described above using colchicine treated seedlings to produce the breeding line has given the best range of plants for gardeners but there is always the prospect of new discoveries.

Marion's knowledge, her skills on the microscope and her experience have enabled her to take a specialised and scientific approach to breeding; she can establish why some techniques have worked and why some have not, she can select crosses and methods that are more likely to result in success and she can try to make sense of some of the surprises she still gets. Like all breeders she gets disappointed when some of her crosses flower and are what she calls 'dogs', and tremendously excited when a new colour break appears. She continues to pursue her goal avidly, the elusive scarlet that has evaded her so far, but it will happen and when it does it will be stunning.

**Jan Wagstaff**



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