

The NCCPG in Devon

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The Devon Group of the National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens is the largest in the country, and its 600 members make a most important contribution to the charity's activities. A full programme of Garden Visits, Plant Sales and Lectures keeps the committee very busy and reflects the enthusiasm we all feel for our cause. Without the NCCPG the heritage of British Horticulture would be severely handicapped through the irreparable loss of plants from a variety of causes. Amongst these are losses from simply going out of fashion or from changes in the way we live, like the dying out of the old habit of passing plants to friends and family. Plants get lost too because the skills needed to look after and propagate them disappear. Even simple skills such as increasing a cultivar by division go by the board because it is commercially too expensive and you get more plants from seed, despite the fact that the seedlings will rarely be true. Naturally also sheer economics often comes into it, as exemplified by the loss of trained gardeners to look after great gardens after the First World War. However, the net result is a loss that is usually permanent.

All this was realised thirty years ago by some members of the RHS and after a meeting the NCCPG was born. As far as Devon is concerned perhaps the most important person concerned in this enterprise was Lady Anne Palmer who then lived and gardened at Rosemoor outside Torrington. Taking the name of Berry on her remarriage she it was who gave her marvellous gardens to the RHS and she is also Patron of our Devon Group, and follows our activities closely from her new home in New Zealand. Her guidance has been crucial as it is actually not all that easy to enthuse the general public with the idea of saving plants. It is much easier to attract funds if you are conserving attractive things like baby seals!

In the beginning the NCCPG took Gardens under its wing as well as Plants, however the inception of the Devon Gardens Trust lifted this burden and we now concentrate on the Plants. The conservation effort is carried out by our ordinary members but the most well known job here is done by the National Collection holders. Their achievement in the last thirty years is truly staggering. Nationally there are over six hundred and in Devon there are over fifty. Of course there are duplicate collections but the range of species and genera covered is vast, though many more are still needed. Please get hold of the Directory and arrange to visit Collections near you. The holders themselves need your interest to encourage and support their enthusiasm. An important reason for this is that when you first take on a Collection you think that your choice is measured by the numbers in The Plant Finder, and you have to have three quarters of them. A number you confidently reckon you can cope with. Almost invariably this proves to be an underestimate. In the author's case an initial Collection of what was then called Polygonum looked simple. Only eleven were listed. When the Collection was handed on it comprised over sixty. A love affair with the Lesser celandine, *Ranunculus ficaria*, started with about ten varieties and ended with a hundred and fifty and growing! First of all, you develop a thirst to understand the full breadth of your subject and this means accumulating things like basic species that do not perhaps figure in the Plant Finder. By now you will also have caught a bad dose of Collectors Mania, a disease delightfully strengthened as you discover that a Collection tends to increase of itself as far as numbers are concerned. Whilst you carefully keep your cultivars separate and increase them by division, it proves impossible not to try germinating a few seeds, just to see what is going to happen. Behold, a whole range of new cultivars is born. In this way

the Collections at Rowden have produced, doubtless compounding the problem, four new *Persicarias*, and over thirty new Water Iris, discovered about fifty new celandines and bred a further six.



Ranunculus ficaria
'Smudge'



Iris laevigata
'Rowden Starlight'

All this botanical fascination is much enhanced when you discover that you need to become a detective as well. Historical research into provenance is essential and entails a lot of laborious work and voluminous correspondence taking in the whole globe usually. Getting hold of 'the right plant' for your collection is so important from a genetic point of view. Sadly commerce has often played a bad hand here. An old variety may have a name that is not very commercial, so it gets changed to sell the plant more efficiently. Thus *Acorus calamus argenteostriatus* could transmute into *Acorus* 'Moonlight Stripes' for instance. An old variety can be reintroduced under a new name simply so that the suppliers catalogue can blazon it as being 'new' when in fact the poor plant has been a favourite for several generations. Another sad aspect of the activities of the unscrupulous is the habit of finding a new plant indeed that looks like an old one. The new fellow looks just like the descriptions of the old classic plant, and so it gets christened with the old name, attracting thereby a lot of interest as everyone thinks the plant has been rescued. In fact it is a forgery. This sort of thing seems to be particularly common with *Dierama* and Primrose varieties.

Following on from the above there is one delightful aspect that arises from looking for old plants. Because old catalogues were rather vague and inexact in their descriptions the possibility of forgery is increased. For instance about three hundred and fifty varieties of *Crocsmia* have been described as 'orange', 'pale or dark orange'. However, if you can find an old gardener, a sadly rapidly diminishing resource, he will be able to tell you exactly what you have for identification because he planted it for his employer some fifty years ago, and knows precisely what shade of orange it was. So Collection Holders collect old gardeners as well as plants. In so doing they get a lot of good friends too.

The resource all this hard work represents is not just a huge botanical archive that sits gathering academic dust at the NCCPG HQ. It is a reliable source of information for a wide range of restoration work, it is available for students who can get this information nowhere else, and it forms a huge bank of knowledge for ordinary gardeners too. Whether you have inherited a huge and important garden or simply have an interest in what you want to do on your allotment, the way to

propagate your favourite plant successfully has been fully researched by its collection holder who will be only too happy to tell you all about it.

The National Collections are to be looked at as living libraries really and there is a need to encourage more people to take the books out. It all looks a little daunting perhaps but though many Collection Holders are professionals the majority are that most British sort of person: the quiet, diffident and determined amateur.

In conclusion I would like to draw your attention to a plant special to Devon where it originated. It is a plant that has history and heritage spread over it like Devon cream on a scone: the Plymouth Strawberry, *Fragaria vesca fructu-hispida*, now known as *F.v.muricata*. In November 1627 John Tradescant arrived in Plymouth when he was in the service of George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, who had put into Plymouth following the failure of his expedition to take La Rochelle from the French. John stayed at a house in Plymouth where the daughter had been out collecting wild strawberries for her mother's garden. Amongst the plants she found was one that was observably odd and presumably bewitched. So, she was going to burn it when John Tradescant saw it and rescued it. He took the plant back to his garden in Lambeth and listed it in his catalogue for 1634. However, John Parkinson had already described the plant in his *Paradisus* of 1629, the first book to describe plants in English. For the next century or so the plant received various mentions in the literature but then seems to have become lost. It was not until 1880 that it appeared in print again, in the *Flora of Plymouth* by Briggs. However, he noted that it had not been seen for 150 years. By enormous good fortune nevertheless, it was found again around this time by Dr Masters growing in Canon Ellacombe's garden in Bristol. Dr Masters gave a piece to E.A.Bowles who promptly put into a special bed called 'The Lunatic Asylum' at his own famous garden at Myddleton House.

The plant is indeed of a mad appearance. In the eighteenth century John Parkinson described it as follows,

"[it] is in leaf much like unto the ordinary, but differeth in that the flower, if it have any, is green or rather it beareth a small head of greene leaves, many set thicke together like a double ruff, in the midst whereof standeth the fruit, which when it is ripe, showeth to be soft and somewhat reddish, like unto a strawberry, but with many small prickles on them, which may be eaten and chewed in the mouth without any manner of offence, and is somewhat pleasant like a strawberry, it is no great bearer but those it doth bear, are set at the toppes of the stalks close together, pleasant to behold, and fit for a gentlewoman to weare on her arm etc as a raritie instead of a flower".



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The precise nature of the deformation which this plant shows is imperfectly understood. The plant will revert. The author found one growing in the wild. It was on a bank under the hedge on the side of the road opposite Plymouth Garden

Centre. However, before you all rush to the spot I must tell you that the site has been destroyed by a housing estate.

The National Plant Collections Directory, cost £5, can be obtained from NCCPG, Home Farm, Loseley Park, Guildford, Surrey, GU3 1HS. They will also be able to send you information about joining as a member