

ISSUE 51



The HPS Hertfordshire Group Newsletter Spring 2014



<http://www.hertshps.com>

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Editorial

Hello again, and a special welcome to the many new members who have joined since the autumn. We've been treated to a wonderful bunch of speakers over the winter and there are plenty more to come, along with two Members' gardens to visit and an auspicious celebration in April.

Yes, some of you may find it hard to believe, but 2014 marks the 25th anniversary of the Herts HPS Group; the very first meeting was held in Letchworth on 1st April 1989. The Committee have decided to commemorate the occasion with an 'Afternoon Tea' themed party to follow Annie's talk *'The Show Must Go On'*, on 5th April. We would particularly like to see former Group Chairs and original members at the meeting to help us celebrate. For more information, go to the Events Programme on p.10.

This edition of the Newsletter contains an article written and illustrated by Josanne Hodgson, who happens to be my mother-in-law (hold the Les Dawson jokes, please!). Having visited the garden of plant-hunter John Bartram in Pennsylvania some years ago, Jo, herself a botanical artist, sketched the Bartram homestead and wrote an account of the great man's life. The result is a fascinating and beautifully illustrated read, with direct connections to our own gardening experience today (see p.8).

The highlight of this summer is the HHPS coach trip in July, which takes in three very different gardens in Northamptonshire, linked to the likes of Nancy Lancaster, Geoffrey Jellicoe and Arne Maynard. It promises to be one of our best itineraries yet, and the lunch looks good too! Don't leave it too long to book - it's first come, first served (details p.5).

So warmer days are on their way, and with Spring in the air it's time to polish your dibber, line up those grubby seed packets, plonk your gardening hat on at a jaunty angle and get set for the season ahead. Bring it on!

Marion Jay

Grand Plant Sale

The Plant Sale will be held on Saturday, 31st May at the Homewood Road United Reformed Church Hall, St Albans, from 10am - 12 noon.

Pricing and sorting of plants will take place at the Homewood Road Church Hall on the evening before the sale, Friday 30th May, from 6 - 9pm. If you have plants you'd like to donate but cannot bring them on the Friday evening, we would be happy to receive them from 9am on the morning of the sale.

As Annie Godfrey eloquently pointed out in her talk at the January meeting, the proceeds from the annual plant sale are absolutely vital to the success of the Herts Group, as only a small percentage of our income is provided by membership subscriptions. Put simply, we depend on the monies provided by the Plant Sale in order to survive as a local, independently funded group.

Annie has generously offered to run a free propagation tutorial for Herts HPS members on Saturday April 19th, with a view to encouraging the propagation of plants for the Plant Sale six weeks later. This is a great chance to learn from a Chelsea medal-winner the secrets of growing plants for free, and help the Herts HPS into the bargain. **Booking is essential** as space is limited. For more details on the tutorial, go to the Events Programme on p.10.

Please ensure donated plants are clearly labelled, if possible with details such as size, flower colour and cultivation info as well as the plant name. Bear in mind plants in flower always sell quickly, and bring the 'wow' factor to the sale.

Any members willing to help, either on the Friday evening or at the sale itself, should contact Beryl Davis (details inside back page).

Seedling Swap

Adrian and Clare de Baat will host this year's Seedling Swap, which takes place at 2 - 4pm on 26th April.

Address: 35 Digswell Road, Welwyn Garden City, AL8 7PB

If you have any spare seedlings, come and exchange them for something different. Anything from perfectly pricked-out plantlets to just what you have left over in the corner of a germinated seed-tray, it's all good. Even if you have nothing to bring, come along - you won't go home empty-handed.

Adrian and Clare's garden opens for the NGS and has featured in numerous glossy gardening magazines. Tea and cake will be on offer to accompany your stroll around their glorious spring borders. There can be few better ways to while away a bright April afternoon.

Subscriptions Renewals

Have you paid your subscription? A reminder is enclosed with this newsletter for those who are overdue. No further reminders will be issued.

New Members

We have had a bumper crop of new joiners since the last Newsletter. I'd like to take the opportunity to welcome new members Thomas Allen, Jennifer Blaxland, David and Jenny Brown, Petra Budai, Carol Byrne, Mr and Mrs Walter Lawrence, Susan and Nigel Penn, Jenny Penwarden, Jan Spragge, Lucy Swift, Christine Strachan, Alison Tracy and Pauline Twogood.

Electronic Communication

Providing us with your email address enables us to keep in touch with you between newsletters, with information about garden open days and other events of interest. Your address will not be passed on to any third parties.

If you are happy to access the twice-yearly Newsletter by downloading it as a PDF from the Herts HPS website instead of receiving hard copy, please do let us know. It saves the group money on printing costs and is just as good if not better, as there are extra photographs available to view online for which space in the Newsletter does not allow. For more information on e-communication, or to opt for an electronic Newsletter, please contact David Singleton (details inside back page).

Polytunnel up for Grabs!

Free to one lucky Herts HPS member - a second-hand 3 metre x 6 metre polytunnel, 10 years old, covered with whitish polythene which is 'not quite perfect but easily restored'. Contact the Membership Secretary, Janet Horton, for more information (details inside back page).

Website News

Members' Password: (request via the Contact page on the website)

Go to our website for extra photographs and regular updates. There's news of a visit to Marina Christopher's Hampshire nursery, Phoenix Perennials, and lots of pictures from the Herts HPS photography scheme: www.hertshps.com

New Committee Members

I'm very pleased to be able to welcome Linda Williams and Beryl Davis to the Committee in the roles of Refreshments Organiser and Plant Sales respectively. Thankyou both for putting your names forward, I'm sure the Committee is breathing a collective sigh of relief!

We are looking for someone willing to take on the role of **Publicity Co-ordinator**. The job entails organising posters and flyers for the Plant Sale, and highlighting the activities of the Herts HPS wherever possible, i.e. as Heather Osborne very cleverly did recently, contacting the *Telegraph* when a top speaker is coming to talk.

Bill Hodgson has been our Website Person and Publicity Co-ordinator for the past year or so but his day job doesn't leave him enough time to do both. Anyone who is interested should contact Heather Osborne on 01727 856354 or via the 'Contact Us' page on the website: www.hertshps.com.

Coach Trip 2014

Coach Trip to Northamptonshire, Thursday 3rd July

67-69 High St, Finedon is a constantly evolving half acre garden behind a 17th Century cottage with mixed borders full of interesting plants and a small productive kitchen garden.

Kelmarsh Hall is a Palladian house set in its 54 acre landscape with obligatory lake and vistas. Nancy Lancaster lived here and created a more intimate 14 acre garden surrounding a historic walled kitchen garden which is now being restored. Bulgy box hedges entice you on to explore its treasures. www.kelmarsh.com

Cottesbrooke Hall is an award winning garden by Geoffrey Jellicoe, Sylvia Crowe, James Alexander Sinclair and more recently Arne Maynard. Formal gardens surround the Queen Anne house with wild and woodland areas a short distance away. www.cottesbrookehall.co.uk

We will be given coffee at 67-69 High Street and have lunch at Kelmarsh. Soup & Sandwiches (£7.50) or Ploughmans Buffet (£9.50) can be pre-ordered or you can take a picnic. The tea room is open at Cottesbrooke.

The cost of this outing is £30 for HHPS members/£32 for non-members. RHS members have free entry to both Kelmarsh and Cottesbrooke and the cost for RHS members is £20, and £22 for non-HHPS members. Check the Kelmarsh website for other concessions available. The coach has a toilet.

The Coach Trip Booking Form is enclosed with this Newsletter - please complete it and return with payment to the address on the form.

A Garden of Rare Charms

John and Madeleine McCormack's Garden Opening for HHPS Members, 11th August 2013.

A number of members took the opportunity to visit John and Madeleine's open garden in Bushey one Sunday last August. The house, a characterful and welcoming place, was originally home to the local confectioner, and still retains the name The Old Sweetshop. At the back of house, the garden plot was long and narrow with a private, intimate atmosphere afforded by trees along the boundaries. Near the back door, pots and urns furnished a paved seating area where members sat and enjoyed a cup of tea and a chat.

Just beyond the seating area stood an extraordinary sundial with an asymmetric, crescent-shaped dial plate and a curiously bulbous gnomon. John had it made in Germany. He explained that the wide gnomon gave a more accurate reading than conventional, linear gnomons, and that the sundial had even been calibrated to compensate for the miniscule time difference between Greenwich and Bushey. In other words, it had been made specifically to be placed in the McCormack's back garden. John said he thought it was the only one of its kind in Britain.

Madeleine is a keen plantswoman and has many intriguing specimens. I noticed a climber growing in a shady spot, its grey, marbled leaves not unlike those of a cyclamen. She told me it was *Schizophragma hydrangeoides* 'Moonlight', which she had bought at Bluebell Nursery in Ashby-de-la-Zouche. I was also very taken with a beautiful specimen of the slender-leaved shrub *Drimys lanceolata*. Under a tree halfway down the garden, primeval-looking *Podophyllum* 'Spotty Dotty' looked completely at home in a glazed pot.

The garden path snaked further and further back, passing a well-planted pond to the right then a small circular, brick-edged bed of spring-flowering perennials to the left, before finally reaching the greenhouse and shed at the back. The shed was immaculately organised, with labelled racks and shelving laden with tools and equipment. John is a retired dentist and he explained that part of the rack system had been used in his old dental laboratory. A sand plunge-bed adjacent to the greenhouse was filled with healthy little cuttings and a three-bin compost system could be glimpsed behind the shed.

The McCormacks have lived in The Old Sweetshop for ten years, and the house and garden reflect their interests; John is an enthusiastic photographer (we had a look at some of his work) and Madeleine has a keen eye for unusual plants. Visiting someone's garden without the crowds of a typical NGS opening is a relaxing experience and brings an insight into the lives of the owners. I really enjoyed our visit and learned a lot as well.

Marion Jay



Madeleine (far left) chats to visitors



The asymmetric sundial



Members enjoying John and Madeleine's garden



Bronze Fennel and a plant from the HPS Conservation Scheme, *Rudbeckia laciniata* 'Starcadia Razzle Dazzle'

The Bartram Legacy

Situated on the banks of the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia is the oldest surviving botanical garden in the USA. It has a fascinating history. John Bartram (1699-1777) was a Quaker farmer who, so the story goes, was stopped in his tracks whilst ploughing his fields by the sight of a daisy. Its beauty and simplicity inspired in him the life-long desire to study and record plant life. He created a garden around his 122-acre homestead in Pennsylvania and to further his botanical knowledge he became an intrepid explorer, his travels taking him to New England, as far south as Florida and west to Lake Ontario. He described his journeys in a letter to a British acquaintance thus:

“I am often exposed to solitary and difficult travelling, beyond our inhabitants and often under dangerous circumstances, in passing over rivers, climbing over mountains and precipices amongst the rattlesnakes [sic], and often obliged to follow the track or path of wildbeasts for my guide through these desolate and gloomy thickets.”

His brave exploits brought rich rewards and John and his son William are credited with identifying and introducing into cultivation more than 200 plants. Linnaeus is said to have called John Bartram “the greatest natural botanist in the world”.

This was the period of the great Landscape Revolution in Britain, when estate owners were re-sculpting their gardens into aesthetic landscapes with the help of designers such as Capability Brown. New and interesting plants were in demand. Peter Collinson, a London draper and keen botanist, commissioned Bartram to send him 20 boxes of seeds per year, paying him 5 guineas a box. The seed was packed in dry sand in a box two foot square, eighteen inches deep and covered with a wooden lath to protect it from the ship’s cat. About 2000 new species came from Bartram’s boxes, including many perennials we still grow today. Bartram’s British clients numbered over one hundred, amongst them Philip Miller at the Chelsea Physic Garden and many members of the aristocracy.

By 1765, through John’s international contacts and fame, his reputation brought him to the attention of King George III, who honoured him as ‘Royal Botanist’, a position he held until his death. Under royal instruction, Bartram botanised in ‘East Florida’, which was newly acquired from Spain.

John Bartram’s son William followed in his father’s footsteps, undertaking a solitary and hazardous four-year journey through eight southern USA colonies. He wrote meticulous notes on the flora and fauna he observed (something his father had been criticised for neglecting to do), published in 1791 as his

'Travels', and made scores of fine botanical drawings, many now held in the British Museum and the Natural History Museum, London.

Descendants of John Bartram later created a flourishing commercial nursery on the site of his garden, producing the first printed catalogue of plants to appear in America in 1873, with '*almost 220 trees, shrubs and herbacious [sic] plants*'. Financial difficulties led to the sale of the family garden in 1850. However, many plants they grew are familiar to us, and have wonderfully descriptive names:

- Sweet William Catchfly; None-So-Pretty (*Dianthus barbatus*)
- Dame's Violet; Sweet Rocket (*Hesperis matronalis*)
- Blackiehead; Blackeyed Susan; Poorland Daisy (*Rudbeckia hirta*)
- Carolina Lupin; Aaron's Rod; Blue Ridge Buckbean (*Thermopsis villosa*)
- Bergamot; Bee Balm; Oswego tea (*Monarda didyma*)
- Bloodroot, or Puccoon-Root (*Sanguinaria canadensis*)
- Rose Mallow Loveliness; Swamp Mallow (*Lavatera trimestris*)
- Lady-in-Red; Scarlet Sage (*Salvia coccinea*)

In 1793 Bartram's many descendants formed the John B. Bartram Association which, together with the Philadelphia Parks & Recreation Department, continues to carefully preserve all 46 acres of the Bartram garden and homestead to this day, keeping alive the outstanding contribution to botany the Bartrams made nearly 300 years ago, and fostering environmental awareness through educational activities and outreach programmes. It is the oldest surviving botanic garden in North America. The Bartram garden, homestead and a newly developed plant nursery are open to the public.

"Whatsoever whether great or small ugly or handsom sweet or stinking... everything in the universe in their own nature appears beautiful to mee." John Bartram, 1740.



The Bartram Homestead

Events Programme 2014

Indoor Programme. All events start at 2pm.

1st March

Graham Gough - “A Nurseryman’s Lot”

In addition to his working life as a nurseryman, Graham Gough has gained a reputation as one of the finest and most entertaining speakers on gardening, plants and plant travel in the country. Graham’s love and knowledge of plants, people and places shines through in his talks and he is not beyond being frank about his likes and dislikes. His light touch will also be sure to provoke a few laughs.

Graham is going to be giving us a realistic view of the pains and pleasures of running a small specialist nursery in the 21st century. **Plants for sale**

5th April

Anne Godfrey - “The Show Must Go On”

Anne will talk us through the ups and downs of running a nursery on the RHS Show circuit. Just what does it take to get awarded that elusive Gold Medal? If anyone knows, Anne would be most grateful if they could pass the information on! **Plants for sale**

Anne’s talk will be followed by the Herts Group 25th Anniversary Afternoon Tea.

Please bring a plate of nibbles suitable for Afternoon Tea, to share - scones, sandwiches, cakes, etc - on a paper plate to avoid washing-up. The Committee will be providing some fizz to make the party go with a swing!

NB No cutlery is available so finger-food only please!

19th April 2pm - Propagation Tutorial

Revvig up to the HHPS Annual Plant Sale on 31st May, Annie is holding a free propagation workshop at her nursery, Daisy Roots, near Hertford.

Booking is absolutely essential as the course will be popular and places are limited. So put your name down and let’s make lots of healthy new plants for that special Saturday in May. Contact Anne Godfrey (details inside back page) to book.

Directions: from Hertford, A414: take 3rd exit on Gascoyne Way roundabout (signed A10) then 3rd exit on Foxholes roundabout (signed Hertford Heath). Go past signed turning on left for ‘Foxholes’ then take next turning right into Jenningsbury (please note there is no sign for Daisy Roots on road). Bear right towards nursery entrance.

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Friday 30th May 6-9pm - Plant delivery, sorting and pricing

Homewood Road United Reformed Church Hall, St Albans, AL1 4BH

(corner of Sandpit Lane and Homewood Road). Please bring any plants you'd like to donate (see p.3 for more details).

Saturday 31st May 10am-12 noon - Grand Plant Sale

Homewood Road Church Hall, St Albans, AL1 4BH.

Helpers required from 9am at the Church Hall (see p.3 for more details).

Sunday 1st June 2-5pm - Member's Open Garden

**Jacqueline Turner, Marford Cottage, Sheepcote Lane,
Wheathampstead, Herts. AL4 8NJ**

Jacqueline Turner's garden used to be a rose garden some 50 years ago (before she took it on). She now has a wide variety of plants giving her colour all the year round. There are winding paths, paved areas and a small wildlife pond for frogs which make a real difference to the snail population.

Directions: from Memorial Hall in Wheathampstead, travel east on Marford Road for less than a mile. Sheepcote Lane is on left immediately after the L'Olivo restaurant. Park on the grass verge opposite the cottage.

Thursday 3rd July 9am - Coach Trip

Coach outing to Northamptonshire. See page 5 for details. Booking form enclosed with this Newsletter or available to download at www.hertshps.com.

Sunday 7th September 2-5pm - Member's Open Garden

Renata Hume, 10 Cross Street, Letchworth. SG6 4UD

'The garden in September is about late flowers and grasses with a background of shrubs, held in check by the circular lawns. Although I love grasses, I don't have many of them because I continue to struggle with shortage of space and the dream of expansive planting over all the seasons!

Directions: from A1(M) J9 signed Letchworth, across 2 roundabouts, R at 3rd, across next 3 roundabouts, L into Nevells Rd, 1st R into Cross St.

4th October

Helen Yemm - 'Thorny Problems' (Schedule change)

Helen Yemm writes the Saturday *Telegraph* 'Thorny Problems' column each week answering readers' garden problems. Tricky challenges that gardeners face range from how to deal with the GOOD (hedgehogs and bats), the BAD

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(moles and aphids) and the UGLY (slugs and black spot) to when is the best time to prune a cherry tree or advice on lawn maintenance. So come armed with your questions for Helen and expect answers from her, and possibly other members as well, as we all get involved in the debate.

1st November: AGM followed by Member's Talk - Madeleine McCormack - "Going to Pot"

Madeleine and John McCormack have a charming suburban garden in Bushey, full of unusual plants. Over the course of a year, Madeleine made a series of small posies for her kitchen table which John, a gifted photographer, captured from every angle. This talk describes and explains the choice of plants used in the posies, illustrated by John's photographs. (See related article, p.6).

December 6th,

Jim Almond - "Something for Everyone"

Jim is a keen grower/exhibitor of alpine plants, a hobby which has given him much pleasure for the past 20 years. Specialising in Primulaceae he has a large rare bulb collection, and is also a member of the Alpine Garden Society judging panel.

This talk should appeal to any audience of discriminating 'plants-people'! Autumn bulbs, berries and colour; summer herbaceous plants; the odd tree; fabulous foliage and the occasional shrub. Specific genera include Cyclamen, Anemonella, Hepatica, Rhododendron and Daphne - yes, something for everyone. He comes very highly recommended by other HPS groups.

Botanical Curiosities

Some time ago I wrote about mercasence; now here are three more examples of odd plant behaviour.

Cleistogamy

Sounds terrible, doesn't it? In fact cleistogamy isn't a disease or a debilitating condition, but simply nature's way of ensuring the succession/survival of plants by producing seed capsules straight from non-opening, self-pollinating flower buds. The process is often missed because it occurs low in the foliage, even under soil or compost. Cleistogamy originates from the Greek root 'kleistos', which translates as 'closed'. Oxalis, cardamine, orchids and grasses show this tendency, but it is a specific feature of many wild and cultivated forms of viola.

Factors such as extremes of temperature, low light levels and lack of pollinators contribute to the way a plant resorts to cleistogamy; in doing so the mechanism provides for self-fertilisation and viable seed production at little energy cost. The only drawback is that seed produced this way is true to type, so experimentalists aren't likely to make any breakthroughs with cleistogamous subjects.

Fasciation

You can't mistake a plant with this condition because it will display what looks like two or more stems flattened and fused together from the growing point. The abnormality is in fact a single shoot that has gone awry. Genetic mutation might be the cause, but fasciation can also be caused by injury from frost or garden tools, as well as viral or bacterial invasion (*Rhodococcus fascians*). If you grow Forsythia you may have discovered already its tendency to become deformed, and particular cultivars of *Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Fascination' have a genetic tendency to recurrent fasciated growth.

Fasciation is also a stable characteristic of a few woody plant cultivars such as *Cryptomeria japonica* 'Cristata' (syn. 'Sekka-sugi') and *Salix udensis* 'Sekka', so anything propagated from seed or vegetatively will inherit the characteristic. Oddly, *Celosia argentea* var. 'Cristata', while being fasciation-stable, comes true from seed.

Unightly it may be, but fasciation doesn't inhibit or weaken its victim, and more often than not does not recur.

Allelopathy

In simple English this mass noun means the chemical inhibition of one plant by another through the release of toxins. The Greek root is 'Allel', meaning 'one another' and 'Pathy' from the Greek 'Patheia' for 'feeling'.

Aside from pine-forest effect and eucalyptus stands elsewhere, allelopathy is very much a feature of the Devil's Gardens of South America where, in areas otherwise rich in flora, single species of tree dominate and have done so for hundreds of years. Local lore attributes these colonies to evil spirits but the truth owes more to nature's mischief than superstition.

In the case of the Peruvian tree *Duroia hirsuta*, however, there is a twist. A recent scientific study of the behaviour of a species of ant, *Myrmelachista schumanni*, native to South American rain forests, found they had the ability to poison surrounding plants to give *Duroia* saplings space to grow, simply because their favoured nesting place is in the stems of *Duroia*. Another South American species, featured in David Attenborough's TV series 'Life', employs similar skill underground to preserve the food source.

Nature confounds, but allelopathy remains a valid example of peculiar botanical behaviour.

Front Cover Plant Profile

Front cover: *Epimedium* 'Amber Queen'

Photograph: Bill Hodgson

Belonging to the Berberidaceae family and commonly known as Barrenwort or Bishop's Hat, Epimediums have a charm all their own, their dainty, winged flowers suspended on slender wiry stems, trembling in the slightest breeze. This particularly fine variety holds its glowing flowers proud above the foliage on almost invisible black stems. Despite its fragile appearance, it is a remarkably tough plant.

Epimedium 'Amber Queen' was raised in the 1990s by Robin White of Blackthorn Nurseries in Hampshire (no longer open), who bred the new variety by hybridising *Epimedium flavum* with *Epimedium wushanense*, originally from China. Chinese Epimediums enjoy semi-shade and, unlike their European and American counterparts, require a moist, fertile soil to thrive.

A long-lived plant once established, *E.* 'Amber Queen' forms clumps of semi-evergreen, papery, heart-shaped leaves which emerge mottled green and brown in spring, followed by a succession of golden-orange, red-tipped 'fairy-wing' flowers which persist throughout April and May. The plant is deer-resistant and I've found slug damage to be virtually non-existent but it is susceptible to vine-weevil (however, as yet I have never lost one to the pesky critters).

Epimedium 'Amber Queen' eventually grows to a rounded clump about 2ft in height and spread. It works well with dusky-flowered Hellebores and the emerging leaves of darker-leaved herbaceous plants which provide a contrast to the Epimedium's airy, whimsical flowers. Plants may be propagated by careful division after flowering, using sharp scissors to cut through the rhizomes. Retain the leaves after dividing, as they help the new plants to establish a new root system quickly. This particular variety is PBR, however, so if you do propagate it, you are not permitted to sell the progeny!

One final tip is that it pays to remove the previous year's foliage in early to mid February, before the flowers begin to unfurl. If this job is left too late, it's almost impossible to trim the old stems without damaging the nascent buds.

Marion Jay

Cornucopia

Cornucopia is the twice-yearly digest of the best articles from the Newsletters of the HPS local and specialist groups. An annual subscription costs just £3, and members can pay for the magazine along with their national renewal remittance.

Committee

Please see the website for details of the committee.

Meetings

Indoor meetings start at 2pm, and are held at the Wheathampstead Memorial Hall on Marford Road, Wheathampstead, AL4 8AY.

Visitors are very welcome and are asked to contribute £5 per visit.

Tea and a cake costs £1 (tea only 50p). If you are able to offer help by serving tea or baking a cake please contact Linda Williams on 01582 832361.

The opinions expressed by contributors to the Newsletter are not necessarily endorsed by the HPS.

The Herts HPS Photography Scheme

Heather Osborne's garden, photographed by Bill Hodgson, August 2013



Kniphofia 'Percy's Pride'



Making a beeline for *Geranium x oxonianum* 'Claridge Druce'



Lush planting edges the pond near shady seating