



The HPS Hertfordshire Group Newsletter - Spring 2016



<http://www.hertshps.com>

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Editorial

And so a new season begins, although frankly the last one one didn't seem to end until very recently. The warm December brought some freakish flowering to our gardens in Hertfordshire; Heather Osborne reported her *Rosa banksia* 'Lutea' in full bloom on January 3rd, along with *Osmanthus delavayi*. I wonder how many other Herts Group members have experienced similar irregularities in their borders this winter.

I'm sure I'm not alone when I say that I'll be glad to see some sunny spring days soon. There's been too much snaffling of Turkish delight and mouldering in front of Midsomer Murders in our house lately, and it's time to blow the cobwebs away. Literally, in the case of my first job, which is clearing out the spider mausoleum, otherwise known as the shed. When I was little, my mother used to name all spiders Harry to make them seem less frightening, but that technique can hardly be applied when faced with a veritable tribe of them. I shall have to gird my loins, grit my teeth and brace myself. Or bribe Bill with doughnuts.

We've got a full Summer Programme ahead this year, with two Herts HPS Members' Open Garden events and the reinstatement of the annual Coach Trip. I'd like to thank both Tessa Davies and Liz Machin for offering to open their gardens, and I'd urge you all to take advantage of the opportunity to visit them. I have learnt so much from visiting private gardens over the years, and with the Herts HPS there's the added benefit of meeting up with other like-minded plant enthusiasts and guzzling tea and cake! The Coach Trip to Merriments and Great Dixter is bound to prove popular, so make sure you book early for that one.

So here's hoping for a benevolent, bright and balmy spring, with weather that makes outdoors an irresistible place to be. Let's get out there!

Marion Jay

Grand Plant Sale

The Annual Plant Sale will be held on Saturday, 4th June at the Homewood Road United Reformed Church Hall, St Albans, AL1 4BH 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 3rd June, 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.

The income generated by the Grand Plant Sale is vital to the successful running of the Herts HPS Group; it enables us to maintain our programme of excellent speakers, and it contributes towards the cost of hiring the Memorial Hall in Wheathampstead for our monthly meetings.

The Grand Plant Sale is also our primary means of connecting with the general public, so it makes all the difference if we present a good display when the doors open on the Saturday morning. 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 that plants in flower always sell quickly, at higher prices, and add a certain pizzazz to the sale hall.

Your help is enormously appreciated, whether providing plants, helping to price them up the evening before, or in manning the stalls on the day. If you are willing to help on the Friday evening or at the sale itself, please contact Beryl Davis (details inside back page).

See listing in Events Programme on p. 21.

Welcome to New Committee Members

The Committee would like to extend a warm welcome and give our thanks to Maggie Lacey, Susanna Geoghegan and Penny Bennetts for volunteering to fill the gaps in our team.

Maggie is our new **Coach Trip Co-ordinator**, and has been busy organising a day out to Merriments and Great Dixter this June (see p. 7 for more details). It's wonderful to see this mainstay of our summer programme reinstated.

Susanna and Penny have opted to share the **Refreshments Organiser** post between them, so the imminent threat of members subsisting on dry biscuits and water has been thwarted. Three cheers for our three volunteers!

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.

Seedling Swap & Rare Plant Exchange

**Diana Garner will host the Herts Group Annual Seedling Swap on
16th April, from 10.30am - 12.30pm**

Address: 'Montana', Shire Lane, Cholesbury, Herts, HP23 6NA

Bring along any spare seedlings you have, in trays or pots, and swap them for something different! It doesn't matter if you come empty-handed - there are always too many plants to go round and you're bound to leave with a few new treasures. This year, we'd like anyone who has been nurturing young HPS Conservation Scheme plants to bring them along too, and pass them on to other members. The Seedling Swap is a great opportunity to get together with other gardeners and have a chat over tea and cake.

Diana's garden is an acre or so in size, and should have plenty of spring colour in April. Highlights include camellias, magnolias, rhodos, erythroniums, scillas, *Prunus* 'Kojo-no-mai', various pulmonarias (including rosy *P.* 'Rachel Vernie'), and the unfurling croziers of fresh green fern fronds. Along with the usual herbaceous borders, shrubberies and vegetable patch there is an apiary, chickens and two greenhouses. A small gate leads to three acres of mixed woodland, planted with thousands of daffodils. Refreshments will be served in one of the small barns if the weather is inclement, but let's keep our fingers crossed for sunshine!

Although Cholesbury is some way to go for the Seedling Swap, the garden makes the trip more than worthwhile - just take a look at the photos on our back cover. Diana tells me that it is beautiful walking country in the Chiltern Hills and several footpaths pass the house, so visitors are welcome to bring their well-behaved dogs and walk from the house any time during the day. The Full Moon public house on Cholesbury Common (about 1 mile away) does excellent food, so why not make a day of it and explore some new territory?

Directions: From St Albans, take Westbound M25 from London Colney (J. 22) or Bricket Wood (J. 21a). Exit M25 at J. 20 onto the A41, signed Hem. Hempstead*. After 11.5 miles, take the A4251 turning (signed Northchurch) which leads immediately to the Wigginton roundabout. Take 1st left towards Wigginton, then immediate left up the steep hill, straight on at crossroads and through Wigginton, past Champney's Health Farm on left, then take next right: Cholesbury Road. Shire Lane is the 2nd turning on the right, and Montana is half a mile down on the left hand side. Plenty of parking in the drive or on the front verge.

Alternatively, drive to Hemel on the A4147, follow signs to the A41 and once you've joined it, follow directions from *.

If you're willing to host this members-only event next year, please get in touch via the website: www.hertshps.com

Marion Jay

Member's Open Garden Events

Sunday, 31st July 2016, 2 - 4pm

13 Seymour Road, St Albans, Herts, AL3 5HL

Tessa Davies' suburban garden is planted for all year interest, with contrasting trees, shrubs and grasses forming the backbone of the garden, interwoven with flowering perennials. Planting is broadly Mediterranean in an English garden setting, i.e. with a lawn at the centre. Tessa says Beth Chatto has been a strong influence, as has Christopher Lloyd.

Highlights in July include *Cytisus battandieri* (pineapple broom); tooth-leaved *Melianthus major*; *Pyrus salicifolia* 'Pendula'; *Cornus alternifolia* 'Argentea', and felty-foliaged *Ballota acetabulosa*. *Rosa glauca* sends up arching sprays of glaucous foliage scattered with dainty pink flowers, and ornamental grasses, such as *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' and *Stipa gigantea*, add shimmer to the borders.

The back garden is approximately 90ft long and is dominated by a large and very old Bramley apple tree, underplanted with aromatic *Phlomis fruticosa* and *P. russeliana*, the perennial poppy *Papaver rupifragum* and evergreen shrubs such as box. In July, different varieties of phlox and hydrangea are the main flowering plants, but *Crococsmia* 'Lucifer' and *Achillea* 'Moonshine' will still be going strong. Refreshments provided. (See listing on p.22)

Sunday, 21st August 2016, 2 - 4pm

2, Barlings Road, Harpenden, Herts, AL5 2AN

Liz Machin will be opening her garden to Herts HPS members at its peak in August. Set in a mature development, the garden is packed with unusual plants - shrubs, herbaceous perennials and climbers - designed to provide all-year-round structure, colour and contrast.

Highlights in August include green-and-white petalled *Clematis* 'Alba Luxurians', starry-flowered *Clematis x triternata* 'Rubromarginata', and towering blue-flowered chicory, *Cichorium intybus*.

There is also a delightfully colourful courtyard garden, incorporating a water feature, and a secluded shade garden. Come along and while away an hour or so in beautiful surroundings, with a cup of tea and a slice of cake. (See listing on p.22)

Both Tessa and Liz have kindly volunteered to open their gardens for Herts HPS Group members, so do take the opportunity to visit them if you can.

If you would be willing to host an open garden event for Herts HPS members next year, please get in touch - we're always keen to hear from you.

(See contact details on inside back page.)

Your HPS Needs You!

Bill and I will be busy seeking pastures new in the West Country this year, so it is time for us to hang up our Committee Hats and offer our places to a couple of fresh volunteers. We will officially retire at November's AGM.

As a result, the position of **Newsletter Editor** is up for grabs. I have thoroughly enjoyed editing the Newsletter over the past 3 years, and I can recommend the post to anyone who enjoys talking about plants (that's all it is, really!). The group activity content, such as the Events Programme, Chairman's Report, etc, is provided by others on the Committee, and merely requires formatting. Our own members frequently share their knowledge on a wide range of topics, writing some wonderful articles and providing photographs, too. Bill has set up a simple and straightforward format which I have used each time I've compiled a Newsletter, and he is happy to provide any assistance needed to get you started. The Newsletter is produced twice-yearly, in early spring and early autumn. If you would like more information, just get in touch (contact details on p.23).

Marion Jay

Do you have basic computer skills? If you would like to learn more about how to run a simple website, why not volunteer for the role of **Website Person**? I can provide everything you need to know to get started, and I'm available to help should you get stuck. The Herts HPS website is already up and running, it is simply a matter of administering it; posting meeting reminders, and adding news items and programme details. For anyone keen to extend their computing knowledge, it's the ideal way to learn! It would be great to hear from you, so please drop me an email (contact details on p.23).

Bill Hodgson

Diana Garner would like to step aside as Herts HPS **Conservation Scheme Co-ordinator** and is looking for someone else to take the role. This post is a great opportunity to meet members of both the Herts Group and other co-ordinators round the country, and is likely to lead to encounters with some very rare plants.

Diana is willing to help any prospective volunteer as much as she can. This a wonderful chance to become more involved in one of the most important aspects of the Hardy Plant Society: retaining our plant heritage. Diana says she had no knowledge of conservation when she started in the role, proof that no experience is required!

NB: As Conservation Scheme Co-ordinator, there is no requirement to attend Herts Group Committee meetings.

For more information on these roles, click '**Contact Us**' on the website:

www.hertshps.com.

Beryl Davis, who organises our plant sales, has made a plea for more donations for the regular plant stall at the monthly meetings. The sales tables have become rather sparse of late so if you have any spare plants, please do bring them along.

Coach Trip - Merriments and Great Dixter

Saturday, 18th June 2016

Coach departure time: 8.15am, from Westminster Lodge, AL1 2DJ

I'm very pleased to announce that our annual excursion is back on the agenda! A booking form is included with this Newsletter. Please cut down the centre of the sheet, return the completed form (left side) to me, Maggie Lacey, and retain the information section (right side) for your records.

The acclaimed **Merriments** gardens were laid out on yellow clay in the early 1980s, covering four acres. They are made up of several different areas, including the Wild Area, the colour-themed Golden Border, the Ponds & Tropical border, which were constructed only recently, and the Formal Garden. Also of interest are the Blue Gravel Garden (agapanthus, delphiniums and grasses) and the Hot Border.

The adjoining nursery has an excellent selection of plants for sale, some of which can be seen growing in the garden; their stock-list includes a number of unusual plants which should kindle a lot of interest.

There is a restaurant at Merriments selling hot meals, sandwiches and baguettes, as well as a wide selection of drinks and even desserts. There are two or three gluten-free and/or vegetarian options available, including filled jacket potatoes.

The home and garden of the late Christopher Lloyd at **Great Dixter** really need no introduction. Most of the garden design was originally by Lutyens, consisting mainly of mixed borders with no specific colour schemes, in contrast to Merriments. Areas include a damp 'Cat Garden' (the planting includes caltha, geraniums & lilacs), the Barn Garden, the Topiary Lawn and the famous Long Border with its succession planting. Possibly the most famous part of Great Dixter is the Exotic Garden, where Christo notoriously dug up the old formal rose beds, replacing them with a riot of exotic planting (but I noticed on my last visit there were still a few 'Mrs Oakley Fisher' roses left - it will be interesting to see whether they are still there).

You will be able to visit the house if you wish, but our trip price does not include a guided tour. Great Dixter has a good-sized nursery stocking an exciting variety of distinctive and unusual plants, 80% of which are grown on site and may well be seen in the garden.

Refreshments are available from the Loggia next to the Great Dixter shop, including baguettes, salads, cakes and hot drinks. There is no hot food, however.

Picnics may be taken in designated areas near the car parks at both venues, NOT in the gardens, please.

Maggie Lacey

www.merriments.co.uk

www.greatdixter.co.uk

In Praise of...Cannas

While not really within the ambit of 'hardy plant', the familiar canna is widely grown to provide vibrant colour in the second half of summer and is often used as a focal point in hot borders or as an essential component of a tropical border. A frequent complaint, however, is that they fail to flower, especially when grown from newly purchased rhizomes.

My eyes were opened one year when visiting The Savill Garden in late June. My cannas, recently planted out, were a foot or so tall while theirs were 3 - 4 feet high! 'How have they done that?' I asked myself. The answer was obvious; they'd been started very early under glass.



Canna 'Orange Punch'

The truth is, I believe, that cannas grow continuously without enjoying a dormant period. After all, they are plants originating in the tropical and sub-tropical Americas where the temperature seldom drops below 20°C, where there is 6-8 hours of sunlight each day and abundant rainfall. Given those lush conditions, why stop growing? So how can we in the UK best replicate these conditions?

Their season starts the day after the first severe frost in autumn. The leaves of the summer growth will be hanging forlornly, but take a look at the base of the plants and you will likely see fresh shoots emerging. To get a mid-summer show of flowers next season it is essential to preserve this new growth before a second night's frost gets to it. Cut down the old stems, lift the rhizomes and examine them carefully and you should see, besides the new shoots, extra growing points



Freshly-lifted canna rhizomes, showing next year's shoots

either as whitish sprouts or pinkish carbuncles, together with a healthy set of fleshy roots. You may well be able to divide the rhizomes at this point.

Each section needs a shoot or potential growing point. A pruning saw makes the best tool for cutting the rhizomes. Cut away any piece of rhizome without roots or

a growing point. Pot up the pieces of rhizome immediately in, say, a 50/50 mixture of John Innes No. 3 and multipurpose compost and grow on in a frost-free greenhouse over winter. Pot on if necessary. By April you can begin hardening off for planting out at the end of May. By then the stems may well be 3-4 feet tall, just like those I saw at The Savill Garden!

Compare the above scenario with rhizomes bought in plastic bags from a garden centre. These will probably have had their roots trimmed off and will therefore take some time to get going, unless treated to bottom heat for a head start. Either way, by planting-out time there will be very little top growth and slim chance of the plant flowering before the end of summer.

Most varieties of canna lie in the yellow-orange-red part of the spectrum, some with variegated or coloured foliage. *C.* 'Wyoming' is a popular variety (with AGM credentials), getting to 8 feet tall with ease, sporting orange flowers and purplish foliage. For an all-year-round display in a conservatory, look out for a dwarf variety called *C.* 'Orange Punch'.

Cannas are happier out of full sun but will enjoy all the moisture and nutrition you care to give them. Be careful when dead-heading as a second flower cluster will appear just below that which has finished.

Roger Trigg

Photographs: Roger Trigg

Prize Cryptic Crossword Solution

Congratulations to Margaret Bardell, who won the £10 Garden Centre Voucher when her name was pulled out of the hat at last December's meeting. For those of you who are still itching to find out the answers - have a good scratch:

Across: 2 Monarda 5 Newt 9 Set 10 BFA 11 Spit 12 Hebe 14 Trowel
15 Alga 17 Peel 19 ii 20 Pond Skater 21 Gate 23 Sea Holly
27 Terracing 29 Bindweed 30 Erodium

Down: 1 Mas 2 Moth 3 Aubergines 4 Dianthus 5 NGS 6 Espalier
7 Titan 8 Nicotiana 13 Paving Stone 16 Apple 17 Peto 18 Ladybird
22 Turf 23 Sun 24 Humid 25 Laurel 26 Cacti 28 Grit

National Subscription Reminder

Membership of the National HPS is a requirement for continued membership of a Local Group. Go to www.hardy-plant.org.uk/hps/join.php for details on how to join or renew your membership with the National HPS, or contact our own Herts HPS Membership Secretary, Alison Tracy, for further information (see p.23).

Please note that although National HPS subscriptions can be paid electronically (by BACS), we are unable to process local group payments this way. Payment for Herts HPS subscriptions may only be made via cheque or cash.

The Divine Witch Hazel

Chris Lane is an internationally acknowledged expert on witch hazels. He wrote the definitive RHS Plant Collector Guide on the subject and holds a National Collection of *Hamamelis* at his wholesale nursery near Sittingbourne. Last February, Bill and I made the trip to Kent to attend his Open Day, with hopes of seeing a spectacular range of witch hazels in flower. When we arrived at 2 o'clock, Chris was just finishing a cup of hot soup and chatting to visitors. As we set off up the track behind the farm buildings, past



Chris Lane



***Hamamelis* 'Vesna' (AGM)**

walnut trees, sweet chestnuts and orchards of dwarf fruit trees, I caught the scent in the air; a sweet, honey fragrance which waxed and waned. In the field ahead, I could see the bright stems of coppiced willows - *Salix* 'Yelverton' and *S.* 'Golden Ness' - then, as we passed through the gate, stretching all the way back from the right side of the pathway, rows and rows of spidery-flowered hamamelis in sunset colours, from palest yellow through gold, marmalade orange to deep rich red.

Most people will see one or two witch hazels at a time, in suburban gardens or parks. A winter garden open to the public will often display them in groups, but nothing prepared me for the sight of an entire field of them. It was an extraordinary display, compromised marginally by the dull, cloudy weather that day. Against the contrast of a clear blue sky, I'd imagine the yellow and russet hues would truly glow.

Chris began his career in 1978, as an instructor at Hadlow College in Kent (which specialises in land-based courses). He was impressed by witch hazels early on when, after two freezing nights when temperatures plummeted to -18°C he observed that the flowers of *Hamamelis* 'Ruby Glow', seemingly withered by frost on the second morning, opened undamaged by midday when the temperature was still -2°C . The flower's ability to survive such extreme cold is



***Hamamelis* 'Adieu'**

due to the high levels of starch stored within the petals, which acts as a form of natural antifreeze. These sugars are also one of the reasons witch hazels are so sweetly scented. The plant's habit of curling up the four strap-like petals when cold also helps by protecting the centre of the flower.

His interest piqued, Chris and another lecturer at the college began to seek out hamamelis varieties, writing to botanic gardens in China and Japan, and forging connections with European nurseries such as Kalmthout Arboretum, Westerstede and Boskoop. Hilliers provided some of the plants here in the UK, and soon they had a sizeable collection which formed the basis for his nursery today. In 1991, Chris visited Kalmthout Arboretum in Belgium where he met Jelena de Belder (after whom the cultivar *H. 'Jelena'* was named). He returned from that trip with enough plants to double his witch hazel collection. In the late 1990s he was invited to join the Woody Plant Committee of the RHS and it was suggested he start a National Collection of Hamamelis. He began to open the nursery for one day each year, donating the proceeds to the nearby Demelza House Children's Hospice. To date he has raised over £8,000 for the cause.

There are four basic species of hamamelis: two originating in North America and two from Asia. The stems of *H. virginiana*, otherwise known as common or American witch hazel, were boiled by native American Indians to make treatments for bruises and inflammation. This Native American Indian's original "magic water" underwent little change when it began to be manufactured commercially, remaining 86% double-distilled witch hazel extract and 14% alcohol. It is still widely used in pharmaceutical and cosmetic products today, valued for its astringent tannins and anti-inflammatory properties. In days gone by, hamamelis was farmed to provide the industry with raw material, but nowadays it is commonly used as an informal hedging plant alongside freeways in America and the clippings from those hedges are taken to factories to be processed. The name 'witch hazel' originates from the perceived similarity between the leaves of hamamelis and the European hazelnut tree, *Corylus avellana*, amongst early colonial settlers, and its popular choice as a divining rod to find water.

Hamamelis vernalis originates from the Ozark Plateau in Arkansas, preferring gravelly river-beds, which are prone to flash-flooding in winter. This species tends to produce suckers, which must be removed promptly. A popular cultivar is *H. vernalis* 'Sandra', which has golden-yellow, scented flowers, bronzed new foliage and excellent autumn colour.

H. japonica, commonly known as the Japanese witch hazel, was the third species to be introduced. Philipp Franz von Siebold, a German doctor and naturalist who worked for the Dutch East India Company, made his first trip to Japan in 1822. He reputedly bribed his Japanese guides to give him some hamamelis plants, which he then sent on to Ghent in Belgium. Witch hazels were revered in Japan, where a heavy flowering in spring was considered a good omen for the autumn harvest. Despite the Japanese connotations of its common name, *H. japonica*

actually grows wild in China. Its yellow flowers are larger than those of *H. virginiana* and have shorter fruiting calyces.

Hamamelis mollis, the Chinese witch hazel, was introduced in 1879 by Charles Maries, who worked for James Veitch and Sons in London. Maries collected seed from China but only one successfully germinated back at Veitch's nursery. For twenty years it went unrecognised as *H. mollis* until George Nicholson, curator of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, visited the nursery and identified it as a separate species to *H. japonica*. At the Witch Hazel Nursery, Chris is still growing one of the propagated offspring from the original *H. mollis*. 'Mollis' comes from the Latin for soft, referring to the plant's felted leaves. This Chinese species is considered to bear the most fragrant flowers, making it ideal for commercial hybridising. *H. japonica* and *H. mollis* cross-pollinate readily, forming the hybrid known as *H. x intermedia*, from which many excellent cultivars have been bred.

The first cultivar of *H. x intermedia*, bred at the Arnold Arboretum in Boston, Massachusetts in 1963, was *H. x intermedia* 'Arnold's Promise', a lemon-yellow, sweetly-scented variety which is still popular today. This was closely followed by deepest-red flowered *H. x intermedia* 'Diane' in 1969, named after the daughter of famed Belgian witch hazel growers Robert and Jelena de Belder. Many more cultivars have emerged since, resulting in such a range of colours, habits and sizes, that it is hard to choose just one variety.

I noticed while moving from shrub to shrub that the scent of one witch hazel variety could be distinctly different to that of another. Many have the typical honey scent, sweet and light, but some are unpleasantly musky, not unlike rotting fruit. My favourite, which I returned to time and time again, was *H.* 'Feuerzauber', a red-flowered variety with a scent just like lily-of-the-valley. Perhaps not the most spectacular to look at (though certainly no frump), its fragrance was bewitching. Chris prefers the yellow-flowered cultivars, recommending *H. x intermedia* 'Pallida' (AGM) above all others. It does indeed have a beautiful, honey-scented flower - large, and lemon-yellow - and a reliably floriferous habit.

All the witch hazels Chris sells are grafted. Grafted plants flower in their first year, unlike seedlings, because the scion is taken from mature wood which has reached flowering age. Chris explained that there are several viable methods of hamamelis propagation other than grafting but they are not cost effective for the commercial grower. Seedlings take too long to reach the appropriate size to sell (and their characteristics are not uniform), and propagation using layering or cuttings is slow, adding an extra year to the growing time compared to grafting. Chris whip-grafts the cultivar scions onto *H. virginiana* seedling-grown rootstocks, and can usually make around 250 in a day. He has invested in a waxing machine which maintains the molten wax at a set temperature, so he simply dips each grafted stem into the wax and places the plant in an unheated polytunnel. He calls this method 'cold callusing', and claims it has a 90%+ success rate.

Witch hazels commonly have a vase-shaped habit which is ideal for underplanting with spring bulbs. Although the summer foliage is large and coarse, many go out in a blaze of glory in autumn so it's worth planting them where they will be seen as the summer display fades. Coincidentally, the flower colour is an indication of each variety's autumn tints, with yellow-flowered cultivars accompanied by golden autumn foliage, orange-flowered by russet, and red-flowered types by crimson-splashed leaves. Rather neat, don't you think?

Hamamelis will grow well in pots, provided the roots are kept shaded and well watered in summer. As a fibrous-rooted plant, it is advisable to pot witch hazel on into incrementally larger containers rather than moving it from a 2-litre to a 7 litre pot in one go. This gradual increase in pot size allows the plant to easily root into its allocated space and prevents it sitting in (potentially fatal) waterlogged compost during the winter months.

Although deer-resistant, virtually disease free and susceptible to few pests, witch hazels have certain 'Goldilocks' cultivation requirements which must be observed if they are to thrive (but that doesn't mean they need porridge).

Despite their reputation as acid-loving plants, they will tolerate neutral/slightly alkaline soil provided it is deep and fertile. They particularly dislike poorly-drained sites or shallow soil on chalk. They enjoy a sunny position, flowering more prolifically in good light, but will not tolerate drying out at the roots in hot weather and wilt alarmingly when dry. Mulching around the base can help, but planting where the roots are naturally shaded from strong sun is ideal. Waterlogging is to be avoided at all costs.



***Hamamelis* 'Diane' (AGM)**



***Hamamelis* 'Arnold's Promise' (AGM)**



***Hamamelis* 'Frederic' (AGM)**

Marion Jay

Photographs: Bill Hodgson

www.witchhazelnursery.com

Old Church Cottage, Long Marston

Last February, John and Margaret Noakes's garden at Old Church Cottage, Long Marston (near Tring) received over 200 visitors over two days, on its first opening for the NGS. John is an active member of the Chiltern Group of the Alpine Garden Society and an avid galanthophile. Their 17th century thatched cottage sits in the grounds of a Grade II listed, 15th century flint-and-stone church tower, the only remnant of a Chapel of Ease dating back to the 12th century; the rest of the church was demolished in 1883. A path alongside the cottage passes by a section of a moat fed by surface water; a vestigial part of the territorial demarcation for the Old Manor of Long Marston, which no longer exists.

Visitors begin their tour with the woodland garden which surrounds the tower, where drifts of snowdrops and aconites festoon the bare earth under gnarled yew trees, amidst a scattering of ancient gravestones. The path adjacent to the cottage offers a view of the moat before leading into the back garden, where snowdrops reign supreme at this time of the year. From the balloon-flowered



***Galanthus* 'Wasp'**

Galanthus plicatus 'Diggory' to skinny, insect-like *Galanthus* 'Wasp', the range of snowdrop forms on display is remarkable. A central island bed is edged with a band of vertically set slates infilled with sharp grit scree, housing many tiny alpinists. Several healthy-looking alpine specimens nestle in a cold glass-house towards the back of the garden, and a greenhouse near the cottage is also well occupied with dainty little characters, including the exquisite primrose-yellow, hoop-petticoat dwarf

narcissus, *N. romieuxii* 'Julia Jane'. Snowdrops of all sizes, some green-flushed, many with intricate markings, proliferate amongst the peripheral borders and lead the eye around the garden.

The end of the plot is marked with an old black poplar tree, which John explained is a rare tree nationally but has a stronghold in the area around Long Marston. A few years ago, Margaret carried out a large survey of these trees over a wide area. She discovered that they were all male and of the same genetic stock. Furthermore, many were aged and declining and needed re-pollarding. She raised funds to have work done on them and John took on an allotment to raise numerous cuttings. After four years, along with volunteers he carried out a replanting scheme around the adjoining countryside (with the landowners' permission). Margaret is currently in the process of organising a Black Poplar Conference to assess the way forward in managing these rare trees.



***Galanthus plicatus* 'Trumps'**

John is very happy to talk about his plants, and confesses to being a tree-peony enthusiast, freely admitting that one of his favourite cultivars is what he terms a 'credit-card plant'. Certain snowdrops also fall into the 'credit-card plant' category and John is wary of unscrupulous visitors who may have an ulterior motive in stooping to admire the plants. It's awful to imagine that, having been given the privilege of visiting such a garden, people might do something as hideous as dig up bulbs and smuggle

them out but these days it's an increasingly frequent occurrence.

John was particularly keen to show me *Galanthus plicatus* 'Trumps', which has large flowers with a green inverted heart-shaped marking on each petal. Very striking. I was drawn to *G.* 'Wasp', too, it's so unusual in its habit and looks very eye-catching en masse. I also earmarked *G.* 'Lapwing' for ordering next autumn; it has a handsome flower with wide, green-marked inner segments and it tolerates a wide range of garden conditions so should be a good one for a beginner like me, who has only ever grown *Galanthus nivalis* var. *bogstandardii* !

John and Margaret's garden is a truly personal creation, and visiting such a place on a chilly day in February really lifts the spirits. It's odd to think that, come summer-time, you wouldn't even know that these little beauties were there at all; visiting Old Church Cottage at snowdrop time is like being granted admission to a secret winter garden, a trove of perfect, pearly treasures.



***Galanthus* 'Lapwing'**

**Old Church Cottage, Chapel Lane, Long Marston, nr. Tring, HP23 4QT
opens on Saturday 27th & Sunday 28th February, from 11.30am - 3pm
as part of the NGS Snowdrop Festival.**

Admission to the garden is £5, which includes mulled wine and muffins.

Go to www.ngs.org.uk for further details and directions.

NB: The NGS snowdrop opening at Rustling End Cottage, nr. Codicote, on Sunday 14th February has been cancelled due to a waterlogged car park.

Marion Jay

Photographs: *G.* 'Wasp': edgewoodgardens.net *G.* 'Lapwing': johnglover.co.uk
G. 'Trumps': [pinterest](https://www.pinterest.com) (unknown)

A Very Public Affair

Bill and I first considered opening our garden to the public when we attended an Open Gardens event, held in Welwyn Garden City in aid of Save the Children (a fixture which still takes place in June each year). We liked the idea of raising money for charity simply by opening the garden, especially as we had recently remodelled our steeply sloping plot. We approached one of the helpers on the gate and were duly enrolled as one of four gardens to open the following year. We enjoyed the experience and visitors were very complimentary, but after three years I decided I would prefer to open later, as the garden reached a peak in July, so I emailed Edwina Robarts who was then the County Organiser (CO) for the NGS. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, I thought, and what was the worst that could happen? That they'd say my garden was too small/steep/scruffy? I could live with that. Not sure what I'd have done if they'd said it was too boring, mind you. Locked myself in the shed with a bottle of Jack Daniels, perhaps.

Edwina was in the process of handing the CO's position over to Julie Wise, so they arrived together on the garden assessment visit. I had seen Edwina on the BBC2 series about opening for the NGS, in which she was portrayed as a fierce and daunting judge, so I was rather apprehensive. Needlessly, as it turned out; she and Julie were chatty and relaxed, and my fears were allayed. Edwina later told me that the producers had fabricated the dragonish persona to add drama to the programme. As we wandered around the garden, I talked about the various planting schemes and highlighted certain plants. At one point, I proudly pointed out a *Thalictrum delavayi* 'Album', which I had grown from seed and which was now in full flower, when to my horror I saw that a sow thistle had grown directly adjacent to the thalictrum's stem and was budding up at three feet high! I didn't stop to find out if they noticed it, just whisked them onwards without another word. Sow thistles notwithstanding, after ten minutes or so they both turned to me and said, 'We'd like you to open your garden for the NGS'. It came as a surprise, as I'd prepared myself for disappointment. Bill's mother, Josanne (a keen garden visitor), was cock-a-hoop with the news and spent the following weeks regaling anyone who would listen!

As ours is a medium-sized suburban garden, I was aware from the beginning that we could entertain our visitors for longer by providing extra diversions. I created a sheet showing sequenced photographs of the stone terracing construction process, and in more recent years I have displayed magazine spreads featuring our garden. I quickly learnt that having a complex planting in the front garden meant that my embattled helpers on the gate and plant stall were being bombarded with plant name queries they couldn't answer, and I was constantly being summoned from the back garden to step in, so I printed off plans of the front garden to hand out to visitors on the gate. I also decided to print sheets detailing a short history of the garden and a list of 'highlight' plants, which many visitors have said they have found useful. In the summerhouse, Bill set up an

electronic photo frame which showed a slide-show of the garden blanketed in snow in winter, and vibrant with colourful bulbs in spring. We also made sure we had plenty of seating all around the garden, the most useful of which is the tree-seat, which can accommodate at least eight bottoms.

Our first Open Garden day for the NGS was somewhat chaotic. Opening with Save the Children had been comparatively easy, particularly as we hadn't had to do any of our own advertising or refreshments. The tea ladies from Save the Children, Mary and Julie, kindly offered to provide the refreshments for our NGS opening and I was glad of the chance to maintain our contribution to the charity. As an inveterate propagator, I had grown a lot of plants to sell, but we drastically underestimated how much time it would take to set up the plant stall and gazebo on the driveway. As it turned out, the new gazebo took an age to put up and suddenly we only had twenty minutes to stock the tables. In 30 degrees of heat, we started scuttling from the back garden to the front with packed trays of plants. Our next-door neighbours noticed our panic and joined in, racing alongside Bill while I frantically arranged the plants on the tables in some semblance of order. With the helpers arriving just before two o'clock, I dashed upstairs to get changed, and emerged wearing cool linen trousers and a summery top, but it took at least twenty minutes for my luminously scarlet face to cool down!

Visitors started to flock into the garden. New garden openers often remark on the surreal quality of this moment. For most of the year, a garden is a private, quiet place, with occasional incursions by visiting relatives or friends. To see that familiar space full of strangers is an unexpectedly odd feeling. They physically fill the place up and behave as though they belong there (which they do, temporarily, having paid their entrance fee!). They also make frank remarks to one another. Thankfully most of these unsolicited comments are positive and, made without the influence of etiquette, can offer valuable insight into how the garden is perceived by a fresh pair of eyes. I was particularly pleased to overhear one visitor say to her friend that the proportions were just right; having previously had a garden which was exactly a quarter of the size of this one, I have been preoccupied with proportion and worry that I tend to concentrate too much on detail and miss the bigger picture. It was good to know I had sized up appropriately.

Over the years, Bill and I have met scores of interesting people through opening the garden. We have learnt an enormous amount from our visitors about the history of Welwyn Garden City, and particularly the early days of Valley Road, circa 1926-30, when a mini-railway ran down what was then an unsurfaced track, transporting the materials to build the houses of the Handside Area. I met someone who had cared for Mrs Owen, a previous occupant (and keen gardener) of Number 84, in her final years and who remembered the timber summerhouse being constructed.

Some visitors have come out with totally unexpected comments, such as the man who visited in 2015 who told us that the grooves in the screws used to construct our summerhouse were all vertically aligned. He said he had never seen this

anywhere other than as a safety technique on aircraft, ensuring a visual check to identify whether a screw is loose. I hadn't noticed those screws in ten years of living here, during which time I'd painted that summerhouse twice!

One of Bill's main jobs when we open is to assist those with walking difficulties to get up and down the steps. Our garden attracts more than its fair share of people walking with sticks; they seem to see the steep terrain as a challenge to be overcome, and tackle it with gusto. Bill also enjoys taking visitors on a Smellathon Tour (more pleasant than it sounds), leading them through all the scented plants in the garden and eliciting a chorus of oohs and aahs as he goes. From moss-like, unexpectedly pungent Corsican mint to sharp and sweet lemon verbena, from the startling effervescence of *Pelargonium* 'Orange Fizz' to aniseed-scented fennel, visitors are often surprised at the intensity of plants' scent. Bill's favourite is *Cosmos atrosanguineus*, the chocolate cosmos; most adults greet the idea of a chocolate-scented flower with scepticism but their faces are a picture when they stoop to get a whiff. On a warm day, it pumps out pure Bourville and makes everyone smile, grown-ups and children alike.

Opening for the NGS is probably the most worthwhile thing I have ever done. It is one thing to create a garden, it is quite another to raise thousands of pounds for charity from it. I am proud of the contribution Bill and I have made to the organisations which benefit from the scheme: the NGS is the single biggest individual contributor to both Macmillan Nurses and Marie Curie Cancer Care. Hospice UK receives hundreds of thousands of pounds from the NGS each year, and the list of beneficiaries goes on. At present, there are 60 gardens which open for the NGS in Hertfordshire and new gardens are always welcome, so if you have ever considered opening your garden for the scheme, why not get in touch? Quite apart from the charitable side of the process, it's hard to beat the warm and fuzzy feeling which comes from so many people eulogising about your favourite creation!

Marion Jay

If you are interested in opening your garden for the NGS, go to www.ngs.org.uk for more information, or call the Herts County Organiser, **Julie Wise**, on **01438 821509** or email: juliewise@f2s.com

Website Update

During 2015, our HHPS website was viewed 11,831 times in total, by 5,150 people.

The largest number of visits came from the UK, at 8,882, with 714 from the US, 232 from Brazil and 213 from France.

Of the articles published, the favourites were 'Visiting Derry Watkins' with 1,208 views; 'Visiting Marina Christopher' with 701 views; the Programme with 620 views and, with 208 views, the profile of *Aconitum carmichaelii* 'Arendsii' from the Autumn 2012 Newsletter. Who knew monkshood would prove so popular?

Success with Echiums

Marion Jay: I noticed you had a line in the Telegraph Gardening section recently regarding growing Echiums and, specifically, how to get them through the winter. Is there any advice you could offer Herts HPS members on the subject?

Roger Trigg: Yes, I replied to Helen Yemm when she wrote about *Echium pininana* after a reader had raised the topic. I dabbled with these giant plants a few years ago and found that *E. pininana* is a real pain to get through its second winter, as it forms a mini palm tree with a 4-5cm thick trunk covered in fiendishly bristly hairs with leaves 40-50cm long hanging from the top. In frosty weather the leaves hang forlornly, and in a complete freeze-up the growing point is likely to perish. Grow them near a wall for protection and they will lean forward to the point of toppling over. If you can get them through the winter the flowering finale is spectacular – the plant suddenly takes off and throws a spike of light blue flowers up to 4m tall.

I found *Echium wildpretii* to be an easier proposition. Instead of the palm tree effect, it remains as a large rosette of silvery-grey leaves until the finale.



Echium wildpretii



Echium pininana

The crown hates winter wet, so I cover it with a large cloche. Then, when growth resumes, it shoots up to 2-3m with a spike of rose-red flowers, about the height of a delphinium or thalictrum, and therefore more appropriate in an herbaceous border than *E. pininana*.

My advice? If you can't resist these spectacular plants, beloved by bees when in flower, go for *E. wildpretii*, grown from seed (Plant World Seeds). They are not biennial, as the books suggest, but triennial; they flower and then die but generate masses of seed in the process.

At www.echiumworld.co.uk you can find pop-up cylindrical plant covers, 110cm high, 30cm wide; ideal for protecting the upright shape of *Echium pininana*. MJ

Front Cover Plant Profile

Front cover: *Clematis cirrhosa* var. *balearica*

Photograph: John McCormack

As its name suggests, this evergreen climber originates from the Balearic Islands - Majorca, to be precise - where it can be seen growing alongside roadsides and on scrubland. Commonly known as the fern-leaved clematis, *C. cirrhosa* var. *balearica* has attractive, dissected foliage which takes on bronze tints in winter. The four-petalled, bell-shaped, greeny-yellow flowers are freckled with maroon within, and emit a gentle citrus fragrance which is noticeable on warmer, windless days. Produced from January to April, they open to around 2 inches across and provide valuable nectar for emerging pollinators such as bumble bees. The flowers are followed by silky, fluffy seedheads.

Although *C. cirr.* var. *balearica* is fairly hardy (down to -10°C), a warm, sheltered site away from icy winds allows the plant to retain its foliage in winter and produce a good display of flowers. Good drainage is also advisable, as a cold, sodden root-run can be fatal. Planted against a wall, pergola or porchway in a south or west-facing position, this clematis will scramble obligingly skywards, though some initial support is required until it starts to twine. Unlike the *montana* and *armandii* types, *C. cirr.* var. *balearica* is not overly vigorous, reaching a height of about 8-10ft, and so may be easily accommodated in the smaller garden.

The RHS recommends planting the crown 2-3 inches deep, to encourage shoots to grow from below ground level. Propagate by taking softwood cuttings in spring, semi-ripe cuttings in early summer, or by layering in late winter or early spring. Pruning is usually simply a matter of tidying up in spring, after flowering, unless the plant requires renovating in which case hard pruning will do no harm but will reduce the following year's display considerably, as flowers are produced on old wood. Fortunately, this species does not suffer from clematis wilt and tolerates a wide range of soil types, provided they are not waterlogged.

As *C. cirr.* var. *balearica* tends to be leggy and bare around the nether regions, and is inclined to drop its foliage in very hot, dry summers, it's best planted behind or alongside low-growing evergreen shrubs such as *choisya* or *hebe*. It may alternatively be allowed to scramble through a host plant, which will help disguise its naked stems and provide the shady root-run clematis enjoy.

Marion Jay

New Members

Welcome to the seven new members who have joined the group since the summer: Penny Bennetts (who has kindly volunteered to organise teas, together with Susanna Geoghegan); Derek and Gillian Curtler; Liz Klir; Elizabeth Richardson, and Joy and Brian Wike. It's great to have you all on board, and we hope you enjoy your membership.

Events Programme 2016

All talks start at 2pm

5th March

Colin Moat - *'Fifty Greys of Shade'*

Colin has been a member of the HPS for over twenty years, and twice a trustee. Now a retired Independent Financial Adviser, he says he is able to fulfil his ambition of running Pineview Nursery properly, which he had been attempting to do for the previous fifteen years. This year he co-ordinated the HPS Kent Group Chelsea display. Plants for sale.

www.pineviewplants.co.uk

2nd April

John Amand - *'Tulips, Old and New'*

John is Managing Director of Jacques Amand International Ltd, based at Stanmore in Middlesex. They exhibit at many shows around the country, including Chelsea, where they have won twenty-nine Gold Medals for their displays of unusual bulbs and plants. Plants for sale.

www.jacquesintl.com

Saturday 16th April 10.30am - 12.30pm

Seedling Swap & Rare Plant Exchange

Address: 'Montana', Shire Lane, Cholesbury, Herts, HP23 6NA

Diana Garner has generously offered to host this year's annual Seedling Swap in her garden near Tring. Everyone welcome. Bring your excess seedlings and/or conservation scheme plants along and go home with something new and exciting! Full details and directions to Diana's garden are on page 4.

Friday 3rd June 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, clearly labelled if possible. See p. 3 for more details.

Saturday 4th June 10am - 12 noon - Grand Plant Sale

Homewood Road Church Hall, St Albans, AL1 4BH

Helpers required from 9am at the Church Hall. Donated plants welcome from 9am. See p.3 for more details.

Saturday 18th June, 8.15am - Coach Trip

Coach trip to two highly charismatic gardens: Merriments and Great Dixter in East Sussex. Refreshments available at both venues. Trip open to members and non-members. See page 7 for full details. Booking form enclosed with this Newsletter or available to download at www.hertshps.com.

www.merriments.co.uk www.greatdixter.co.uk

Events Programme 2016

All talks start at 2pm

Sunday 31st July 2 - 4pm - Member's Open Garden

13 Seymour Road, St Albans, Herts, AL3 5HL

Tessa Davies' influences include Beth Chatto and Christopher Lloyd. Her suburban garden in St Albans combines Mediterranean plants with an English garden setting. The focus is on contrast and all-year-round interest. There should be a riot of colour in July, so don't miss out. This Herts Group event is for members only. Refreshments provided. See p.5 for full details.

Sunday 21st August 2 - 4pm - Member's Open Garden

2, Barlings Road, Harpenden, Herts, AL5 2AN

Liz Machin's garden in Harpenden is a beautifully laid out combination of shrubs, herbaceous perennials and climbers, designed to give structure and colour in every season. This Herts Group event is for members only. Come and enjoy an hour or two in a gorgeous late summer garden, in good company. Refreshments provided. See p.5 for full details.

1st October

Geoff Hodge - '*Pruning - Making it Simple*'

Geoff is a freelance garden writer, writing for various national gardening magazines. He was Web Editor for the RHS, Gardening Editor of 'Garden News' and technical writer for 'Garden Answers' magazine. He is an author and broadcaster, appearing on Q&A panels at flower shows across the country. He may make gardening butchers of us all! www.gardenforumhorticulture.co.uk

5th November - AGM, followed by Member's Talk:

Margaret Easter - '*Grasses for the Small Garden*'

HHPS member Margaret holds a National Collection of Thymus in her Harpenden garden, which she opens for charity. She has published several books, including 'The Thyme Handbook'. In this talk, she will be talking about another of her interests: ornamental grasses. www.thymus.co.uk

3rd December

Chris Chadwell - '*Wild Flowers of Britain*'

Chris is an intrepid modern day plant hunter, freelance lecturer, travel photographer and documentary maker. He is an ardent supporter of wild plant habitat conservation in Britain. Since 1984, he has been proprietor of Chadwell Seeds and has been Leader and Botanist on twenty-nine expeditions to the Himalaya. We hope he will bring seeds for sale. www.chadwellseeds.co.uk

Our Christmas Party follows Chris's talk.

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 Susanna Geoghegan on 07799 038833.

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

**Diana Garner's spring garden at 'Montana',
photographed by Bill Hodgson in 2013**



**Diana will be hosting the Seedling Swap at Montana on April 16th -
don't miss the chance to see her glorious woodland garden**



Hepatica nobilis



Pulsatilla vulgaris