

PROPAGATE TO CONSERVE: A TALE OF NEGLECT AMONG IRISH CULTIVARS

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There is a rising clamour within Ireland and Great Britain, among the keener gardeners, for a more interesting selection of garden plants to be made available commercially. It seems to me, a botanist and historian of horticulture, that nurserymen only respond to the desire for interest and novelty by trying to produce more new cultivars, and they do not take the time to look back to those cultivars that are already available but not necessarily widely cultivated. The new awareness of the older garden plants has been fostered in Britain by the National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens (N.C.C.P.G.) and by its affiliated group in Ireland, the Irish Garden Plant Society.

Think about this for a moment. In the nursery business, it is the *newly named cultivar that is the expensive plant*—sometimes this means little more than an unscrupulous nurseryman has renamed a plant, something which happens more frequently than perhaps we are prepared to admit. In many other businesses it is the older thing which is the more expensive—for example, antique furniture, vintage cars, antiquarian books.

I do not know the reason for this peculiar state of affairs in horticulture, but I do know that gardeners are now beginning to show their appreciation for the older cultivars and for the nurseries which propagate and stock such plants. I would like to think that nurseries understand this trend, but many nurserymen are still more intent on profit than on pleasing customers. That is perhaps a harsh thing to say, but the modern nursery trade has moved from trying to attract the interested customer, to trying to market as many plants as possible, as rapidly as possible, having propagated them as easily as it can. No longer does one hear of a nursery where one can wander around, select the plants one wants and arrange to collect them when they have been lifted and packed.

That was the old way of doing business and if one really wanted to please a favoured customer, a garden boy was strategically placed behind a clump or rhododendrons bearing a basket in which was reclining a bottle of the local fire-water! And in those days one Irish nurseryman advertised—note the subtle nuances of the order of words—that his was “the only nursery in Ireland worth a button, and is the most interesting nursery probably in the world”.

The nurserymen of the 1980s have a lot to learn from their predecessors about advertising their wares, and indeed about the plants they should be plying to their customers. Nursery pro-

prietors are, I would suggest, in a unique position to fashion taste: give the customers an interesting and varied selection of plants and they will buy. You don't have to find the latest new blue rose or the yellow *Camellia* or a silver-rimmed *Omphalodes cappadocica* or even a variegated *Hypericum androsaemum* (although these all exist). Just look around at what is available in the gardens of keen amateurs.

Another point to ponder. The average garden—whatever that may be—contains perhaps 500 different plants (indeed that is probably a high figure). (The gardens of the keenest gardeners will, of course, contain many more plants—the great Irish naturalist and one time unofficial head-gardener at Dublin Zoo, Robert Lloyd Praeger, reckoned he had 250 species in one small portion of his rock-garden and that certainly is not exceptional.)

Even if each of the putative 500 plants was a different cultivar of Irish origin, that still would leave over 500 cultivars of Irish origin for another gardener to cultivate without any duplication. But sadly of those 1000 Irish cultivars—that is the approximate figure which I have computed from my register of cultivars raised in Ireland—less than one-third still survive. It should be noted that the figure of approximately 1000 does not include at least another one thousand named daffodils (including 'Lucifer' raised by Mrs. Alice Lawrenson about 1900, Mrs. Kate Reade's recent 'Foundling' and many others), and a further 1000 named roses; Irish nurserymen were and are the world leaders in the raising of cultivars of *Rosa* and *Narcissus*.

Where have the missing plants gone? Why are they not available in nurseries and garden centres?

Some are very difficult to propagate. It would be wrong to pretend that the Slieve Donard's incomparable selections of *Dierama* are easy plants for any nurseryman to handle. They do not tolerate transplanting readily and, as they have to be raised vegetatively, to maintain the true cultivars, they cannot be increased rapidly. Perhaps this is a genus which could be studied with a view to attempting some form of tissue culture, for the Donard cultivars of *Dierama*, with the names of birds—'Blackbird', 'Heron', 'Windhover', 'Snow Goose' (all tall forms)—and with the names of characters from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—'Titania', 'Oberon', 'Miranda', and 'Puck' (all dwarf cultivars)—are almost entirely lost.

The Slieve Donard Nursery's other plants have fared somewhat better. It is principally known for its magnificent *Escallonia* cultivars—'Apple Blossom', 'Peach Blossom', and the Donard series, e.g. 'Donard Beauty' and 'Slieve Donard'. These are still excellent plants for small garden and are especially suitable for coastal gardens and as hedging. Most, if not all, still survive and some are regularly offered by the trade. But, I would like to see somewhere a

full collection of these plants established here in Ireland as a conservation and reference collection with accurately identified and named cultivars; it must include introductions such as *Forsythia* × *intermedia* 'Lynwood' and *Hypericum* 'Rowallane' as well as the nursery's own originals. There are plans for such a Slieve Donard collection in Northern Ireland, under the care of the National Trust, but progress is slow and every year lost admits for the possibility of another lost plant. The Northern Ireland Heritage Gardens Committee hopes to promote this idea more vigorously in the coming year.

The urgency of establishing such a reference collection can be illustrated by the following tale. In May, 1986, at Newcastle I was surprised to discover a series of not less than seven *Rhododendron* cultivars raised and named, but not validly because the names were not registered with the International Registration Authority by the Slieve Donard Nursery. These have now been taken into care by a local nursery and I am confident that the cultivars can be perpetuated. 'Grand Gala' and its unnamed sister are magnificent plants; 'Evelyn Slinger' has a unique colour and a marvellous full flower. The others need to be propagated and tried in a few other gardens before final judgements can be made, but these are part of Irish heritage of fine garden plants and without a concerned nurseryman they would be lost.

The Slieve Donard Nursery ceased trading in 1974. It had served Irish gardens for over half a century and had produced a series of superlative plants. Although not its own, *Meconopsis* × *sheldonii* 'Slieve Donard', is undoubtedly the best of the perennial blue poppies—it has many imitators and a host of imposters and that surely is the best recommendation. Could you imagine Irish gardens without it? Yet it is another plant that is slow to increase and will be lost if dedicated gardeners and nurserymen do not keep it and increase it vegetatively.

There are and were other Irish nurseries with as fine a tradition. In 1987 Daisy Hill Nursery in Newry is a century old. Its founder, the English-born horticulturist, Tom Smith introduced the Japanese October cherry, *Prunus subhirtella* 'Autumnalis', to Europe—a fine plant, not as spectacular as *Prunus serrulata* 'Kwanzan' but, in my opinion, it is much to be preferred. *Aconitum* 'Newry Blue' was produced by Daisy Hill and again it is flattered by its many imposters. I am told that this is raised from seed in Germany, but that is quite impossible as it is a clone and has to be increased vegetatively.

A whole series of *Bergenia* cultivars came from Newry before the end of the last century. A few survive in gardens and this is one case where I would have to say that the old cultivars are not as good as the newer ones. Yet can any modern cultivar beat the true *Bergenia* 'Ballawley', raised by Desmond Shaw-Smith of Ballawley

Park in South Dublin? I don't think it can—liver-bronze leaves in winter turning emerald green in spring, an excellent ground-cover plant and one which also manages to produce lustrous magenta flowers.

Laburnum alpinum 'Newryensis', which was introduced from Daisy Hill Nursery, is not a plant I can recommend with my whole heart because of the poisonous seeds, but as a tree for a garden where children are not a concern, it takes some beating, because it is late flowering. It is extremely rare in cultivation. There is a plant in the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, from which An Foras Taluntais (Kinsealy) obtained scions for grafting; this was successful and we have been able to resupply the Newry nursery and also the National Collection (designated by the N.C.C.P.G.) of *Laburnum* at Powys Castle in Britain. It blooms after all the other *Laburnum* cultivars; indeed it looks dead until mid-June.

As far as the Daisy Hill Nursery's plants are concerned we are in a sorry state. Very few now survive—*Ribes sanguineum* 'Splendens' is in cultivation, but has been replaced by cultivars with larger inflorescences. *Primula* 'Our Pat' is available in a number of nurseries in Northern Ireland, but where have all the *Aster* and *Trollius* cultivars gone—perhaps they were not disease-resistant? But not all old cultivars are weak; some older plants may have qualities that could be valuable in future breeding programmes—disease resistant, for example—and their loss diminishes the gene-pool, quite apart from depriving gardeners of older cultivars. The conservation of garden plants is not merely a matter of sentimentality; it should be a matter of concern for all those interested in better gardens.

What other Irish cultivars should be propagated more widely, and be made better known again? *Papaver* 'Fireball' has had some considerable publicity recently in *The Garden* under its invalid name 'Nanum Flore Pleno'—a mouthful that I was only too pleased to point out was unnecessary! It is available occasionally in Britain, but I have not seen it offered by an Irish nursery. It is perennial, spreads quickly by underground rhizomes and should be easy to propagate. *Rosa* 'Souvenir de St. Anne's', a branch sport of 'Souvenir de La Malmaison' noticed by Andrew Campbell, head gardener at St. Anne's, Clontarf, at the beginning of this century, has been praised highly by the doyen of British rosarians, Graham Stuart Thomas. It flowers from May until Christmas, is hardy, does not need coddling, and grows well on its own roots. Besides that it has elegant shell-pink flowers and a strong fragrance. But it is not a modern rose and so, because in the rose world nothing more than ten years old is considered any good, it is rarely propagated. But it roots quickly and grows strongly. One Irish nurseryman is propagating it and finds it easy to market.

Concerning Irish roses, it saddens me very much to think that

hundreds of native cultivars are no longer grown. It saddens me even more to think that the great rose nurseries, Dickson's and McGredy's have no interest in keeping their historic plants. Where is 'Irish Beauty', 'Irish Fireflame', and the whole series of unique single hybrid-tea roses raised at the beginning of this century by Dicksons of Hawlmark? With great difficulty I found one, 'Irish Elegance', for Wendy Walsh to paint as the final plate in the second volume of *An Irish Florilegium*. Might we see one day not just rose trial gardens, but also a conservation collection of Irish roses with the best of the older cultivars preserved for posterity? Not all need be kept, but some at least should be propagated and preserved.

I have mentioned so far mainly trees and shrubs and, of course, there are many herbaceous cultivars too. Ireland was known early this century as a land of primroses where "little old ladies" kept secret gardens brim-full of all sorts of lovely primroses. Very few of these survive; vine weevil and viral diseases have taken a heavy toll, but whose which do exist still are worth the trouble of keeping. 'Guinivere' has many good qualities and is still abundant but not on sale; 'Rowallane Rose' is a superb candelabra primrose that is sometimes listed in Britain but again not here. Has anyone seen a nurseryman offering genuine *Schizostylis coccinea* 'Mrs. Hegarty', or *Saxifraga* 'Ballawley Guardsman' recently—more plants much flattered by hosts of imposters. The genuine articles are extant, but not on sale despite what may appear in garden centres.

That, of course, raises another problem. Many nurseryman do not bother to check the authenticity of plants that they sell. In recent years I have seen plants of the native heather, *Erica* × *stuartii*, widely sold in Ireland and Britain and labelled 'Irish Lemon', but very, very few of the plants were correct. That cultivar is unmistakable having lemon yellow young shoots in early summer. That is just one example. The problem of cultivar identification and verification is difficult and complicated. It has not been helped by historically unsound cultivar selection schemes which take no account of taxonomy; in some of these schemes there was no attempt made to verify the plants submitted for trial or to obtain original, authentic stock. Thus the final selection could have been a cultivar quite distinct from the putative trial plant. Many cultivars (of perennials and woody plants) are clonal in nature and must be propagated vegetatively; because they are genetically uniform (each one is a clone) it is impossible in biological terms to subject them to selection. If there are differences apparent during a trial these may be due to diseased stock, to the mixing of stock, or to the misidentification of plants.

But I have digressed into another topic, the correct naming of plants, and I should return to my purpose. Over the past two and a half centuries Irish gardeners and nurserymen have produced some of the finest garden plants available to gardeners in this part of the

globe. It is our duty as the current gardeners and nurserymen to see that the best—at least the best—of these plants remain in cultivation. I am not suggesting that Irish nurseries should stick only to Irish cultivars, for in this harsh world that would be suicidal. I seek merely to point out that we have a heritage of outstanding value and excellence in all fields of horticulture and that we should be proud of the achievements of past generations. Many of the older plants make superb subjects for modern gardens and should not be despised because they have been “around for a long time”—like the best wine, age should give them a glow of quality. Antique plants can be beautiful and interesting, and from the nurseryman’s point-of-view, they can also entice appreciative customers. They are certainly plants to be cherished and propagated again.

I, therefore, plead that nurserymen should not neglect the older cultivars. They can add lustre to gardens and create interest. Would it not be nice to be able to say again, as Tom Smith did with such succinctness, that Irish nurseries are the most interesting nurseries probably in the world?

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