

## Aucuba Research

A plant without a name, or with an unreliable name or a synonym is of little use. A National Collection full of plants with unreliable names and synonyms is a nightmare!

Linneus laid down the system for naming plants to species level in the mid 1730's. In 1692 Engelbert Kempher described *Aucuba japonica*, but it fell to Carl Thunberg to name it in 1756 using the Linnean convention, and to publish a description with the name. By the mid nineteenth century the need for a convention on the naming of cultivars was recognised, but the nurserymen involved in implementing this convention when introducing new cultivars were, and

still are, often less punctilious in publishing descriptions of their new named introductions and thus synonyms have come to abound.



*Hilliers Arboretum in April*



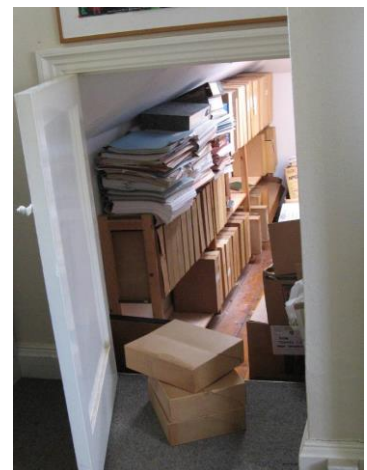
*2 Brodsworth hall, Yorkshire, 1860 garden*

All plants theoretically have an international regulator for the registration of their name; in the case of *Aucuba* this is the International Registrar for Unassigned Woody Plants based at the Arnold Arboretum, Boston, USA. Realising the unreliability of the names of specimens in my *Aucuba* collection, a letter to this Registrar seemed logical. His reply was to the effect that "the aucubas seem to be in a muddle, when you have sorted them out it would be helpful if you could let me know"! So as Collection Holder it appeared that the task of sorting out names and

synonyms fell to me. As I understood it, I had to find the earliest published description of each named cultivar.

The task was daunting; yet little did I realise how much pleasure, satisfaction and at times excitement I would experience through trying to carry it out. From the start the RHS offered advice and financial help through bursaries, and the support and encouragement that I have received from everyone I have contacted regarding this project has been very kind and generous.

So the hunt for information was on! Information was to be found in established gardens, herbaria, horticultural literature and nursery catalogues. The hunt has taken me from basements eg at Kew where their herbarium specimens are stored under carefully controlled conditions, to attics, eg the Cori Building at Cambridge



*3. Under the eaves of the Cori Building, Cambridge*



*4. Engelbert Kempfer's specimen of 1692 in the Sloan Collection at the Natural History Museum, London*

University Botanic Garden where boxes of old nursery catalogues are stored neatly under the eaves. High under the soaring marble arches of the Natural History Museum in London is where the Sloan Herbarium is lodged, each volume bound in beautifully tooled leather covers, taken out and laid for inspection on soft cushions, and handled with white gloves. For me this visit was a literally awesome experience, as here I was shown the actual specimen collected by Kempfer in 1692 and was allowed reverently to touch it, over 300 years later!

Snippets and occasionally chunks of information were to be gleaned from the great botanical libraries of the RHS, Kew Gardens, Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh, Glasnevin and the British Library. My quest for old nursery catalogues revealed the patchiness of this important research resource. By nature catalogues are ephemeral, as last year's issue is usually binned when the new one arrives.

It has been on the Plant Heritage "to conserve" list since the organisation's first inception, but in common with most libraries their collecting and cataloguing seems to have slipped down the "to do" list. There is an urgent need to redress this situation as nurserymen may describe new cultivars in their catalogues as readily as in press releases and journal articles. However, I have to admit that the thrill of sifting through a box of unsorted old catalogues and finding a nugget of relevant information far outweighs a similar find on a neatly ordered database.

Recently I have travelled to The Netherlands to see their Aucuba Trials and to compare notes. This also gave me the opportunity to trawl the libraries of the Universities of Leiden and Wageningen for more information, together with the Leiden University Herbarium.

Much of my research boils down to establishing that information does NOT exist. Maybe no reliable description can be found to go with a particular cultivar name. Currently I have an accumulation of various sized pieces of a large jigsaw to fit together as best I can, to give reliable names and descriptions of as many cultivars in my collection as possible. Inevitably the picture will not be complete when I have finished, but I trust I will eventually have something helpful to send to the International Registrar of Unassigned Woody Plants.

Linda Eggins  
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*5. One of many sections of Leiden University herbarium*