



SUSSEX GROUP

AUTUMN 2023 No 106



THE WORLD IN ONE GARDEN

Stunningly beautiful, and botanically rich, Borde Hill Garden is renowned as a plantsman's paradise and has been lovingly tended by five generations of the Stephenson Clarke family. The intimate 'garden rooms' feature a remarkable collection of historic camellias, rare plants and champion trees including magnolias, brought back as seeds by the Great Plant Hunters a century ago from all four corners of the world.

An enticing 2023 events programme:

- **Specialist Plant Fairs** 7 May & 17 Sept
- **Roses in Bloom** 12 - 23 June
- **130th Celebration** 10 - 18 June
- **Sussex Guild Craft Fair** 24 & 25 June
- **The Artist's Garden** 1 July - 30 Sept
- **Open Air Opera** 21 & 22 July
- **Great British Food Festival** 9 & 10 Sept

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OPEN: 11 February to 31 October 2023, 10am-5pm. Gift Shop, Plant Sales, Café, Dog Friendly



Plant Heritage

CONSERVING THE DIVERSITY OF GARDEN PLANTS

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COVER: *Dahlia* 'Café au Lait', photograph: Marguerite Wright

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JOINT CHAIRMEN'S LETTER

ANDREW GAUNT and MADELAINE WARD

Welcome to the autumn edition which celebrates our Sapphire Anniversary. There are two big events coming up. The first is the national celebration at RHS Garden Wisley on Wednesday, September 27 with Alan Titchmarsh, our president, and encompassing talks, lunch and tours around the gardens. It will be a day to explain the great work that has gone before us and to showcase where we are today. Further information, including how to book, is on plantheritage.org.uk or ring national office on 01483 447540.

Wakehurst is the venue for the Sussex group's celebration day and AGM on Saturday, October 14. We have a star line-up from Andy Sturgeon, the award-winning garden designer, to Iain Parkinson, the curator of Wakehurst, and Emma Crawforth, a trustee, who will tell us what's next for the charity. There will also be special tours of the garden. The venue can hold 80 people so numbers will be restricted; the booking form was on the Sussex Mailchimp sent in July. Please book early.

The season is going well with good sales of our plants – our stock is sold very quickly so we are always on the lookout for more. If you're dividing any perennials this autumn, we'd be pleased if you could pot some up for the sales. Our visits to gardens with collections and to nurseries to see the commercial side of horticultural production have been fully booked. We've found that members have been pleased to be able to question real experts.

Sussex members also went on a training day of Persephone, the plant collections database system, at Crawley College. It's a great system that is well thought out and is very useful for Collection Holders. A single data set for all collections will be a very powerful search tool.

The Sussex dispersed National Collection of *Narcissus* bred and introduced by Noel Burr now has 20 growers. Gary Firth has handed over the lead of the group to Roger Parsons, who is secretary of the Daffodil Society (see

page 20 for more details of this and becoming one of the growers). A Burr cultivar, ‘Hever’, was shortlisted for the Threatened Plant of the Year.



We were very pleased that *Rhododendron* ‘The Dowager’ (pictured left) from Leonardslee Lakes & Gardens in West Sussex won the People’s Choice award in the Threatened Plant Competition.

Jamie Harris, the head gardener, said: “From our National Plant Collection® of Leonardslee *Rhododendron* hybrids, we

could have chosen more than 30 that have been designated either Threatened or Endangered by Plant Heritage. We selected a shortlist of five for submission and ‘The Dowager’ was selected by the panel. A cross between *R. ‘Muriel’* (another rare Leonardslee-raised hybrid of *falconeri x grande*, with currently only a single extant specimen) and *R. arboreum*, it was raised by the Dowager Lady Loder, Sir Edmund Loder’s widow, who managed the Leonardslee estate from his death in 1920 to 1945 when her grandson Sir Giles Loder took over. It was named ‘The Dowager’ in honour of Lady Loder by Miss E. Godman of South Lodge, the estate opposite Leonardslee. The two estates often shared plant material and the families were good friends. Miss Godman introduced the plant in 1968 and it received the Award of Merit. At Leonardslee we have only a single extant plant of this hybrid and it is unknown if any plants exist elsewhere, although it is unlikely.”

We welcome our new members (page 12) and encourage you to come along to events. We also hope that you will take advantage of the Plant Exchange (look out for the emails on that early next year). With the cost of fuel as it is, several of our group car share to talks and events. We can try to help with these if transport is difficult. Just shout if you need a lift.

A special thank you to Sue Norgrove-Moore for our regular Mailchimp email to members with seasonal photographs and Clare Hogan, who is putting together the newsletter while away travelling. The wonders of IT.

SUSSEX GROUP EVENTS 2023-24



OCTOBER

Sunday, 1

Open day

1-5pm

Stewartia (Asian spp.)

- High Beeches Woodland and Water Garden
- Handcross, Haywards Heath, West Sussex, RH17 6HQ
- National Garden Scheme open day - light refreshments available
- Adults £10, children free

OCTOBER

Saturday, 14

Plant Heritage 45th anniversary celebration day and AGM

10am start

- Wakehurst, Ardingly, Haywards Heath, Sussex, RH17 6TN

ANDY STURGEON on *From the early days of plant hunting to our changing landscapes*. The garden designer is winner of nine gold medals at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, plus three Best in Show awards since 2010. Working both in the UK and internationally, he is a Fellow of the UK Society of Garden Designers and is listed as one of the UK's Top 10 garden designers by both *House & Garden* magazine and *The Sunday Times*.

IAIN PARKINSON on *People, Plants and Places*. The curator of Wakehurst has worked at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew and Wakehurst for more than 30 years. One of his previous roles was conservation manager, so he knows the gardens very well.

EMMA CRAWFORTH on *The past 45 years – what's next for Plant Heritage?* She is a trustee of our charity. She has worked in public gardens, including gardens for the National Trust of Scotland and England, as well

as in a commercial nursery. Emma trained at RBG, Kew and has been gardening editor at *Gardeners' World* magazine.

LUNCH BREAK

There are three cafés at Wakehurst or you are welcome to bring your own lunch.

TOURS: Wakehurst gardeners will lead behind-the-scenes tours of the National Plant Collections® at the gardens.

Our thanks go to Wakehurst for hosting us and for waiving the parking fees for you for the day. This event is free for Plant Heritage members. We welcome friends or members of local gardening groups, so please share this with others. The cost is £15 each – and free parking.

The booking form was on the Sussex Mailchimp sent in July. If you can't find it, please email Maddy Ward, our co-chairman, if you would like to book your place on madelaineward@aol.com. Numbers are limited and the closing date for bookings is September 25.

1.15pm 38th Annual General Meeting

Agenda

1. Welcome
 2. Apologies
 3. Minutes of the 37th Annual General Meeting, 2022
 4. Chairman's annual report
 5. Treasurer's report
 6. Report from Dr Gary Firth, Collections Coordinator
 7. Report from Steve Law, Plant Exchange Coordinator
 8. To confirm the election of officers and committee
 9. Any other business.
- Plus, tea and cake, plant sales and raffle
 - If you would like to become involved with our *Narcissus* Noel Burr dispersed collection, bulbs will be available (see page 20 for details)

FEBRUARY 2024

Saturday, 3

Seedy Saturday

10am-3pm

Town Hall, Lewes East Sussex, BN7 2 QS

Saturday, 10

10.30-12.30

Propagation workshop (£25 plus refreshments)

Oncidium National Plant Collection®

The Mathers Foundation, Pulborough, West Sussex

- Booking details to follow

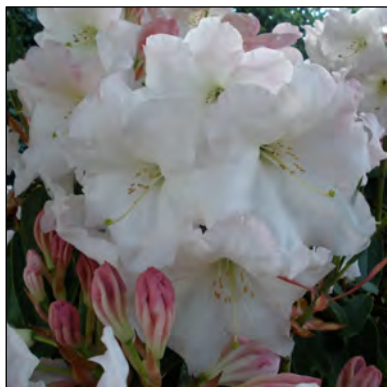
MARCH

Saturday, 2

Spring talk

2pm, Haywards Heath Town Hall, 40 Boltro Rd, RH16 1BA

The Gardens of the Loder Family restored by Jamie Harris,
the head gardener of Leonardslee Lakes & Gardens



***Rhododendron* ‘Loderi King George’ (Leonardslee Lakes & Gardens)
and *Rhododendron* ‘Loderi Venus’ (Maria Firth)**

- Plus, tea and cake, plant sales and raffle.

The talk is free to members: please invite your friends - it is only £5 to non-members, who are most welcome.

APRIL

Wednesday, 10

Early spring visit

10 30am-2.30pm

Behind the scenes at Worth Park camellia walk and the history of the Victorian gardens. The tour with Stephen Peters, the head gardener, Contact Maddy Ward (madelaineward@aol.com) for more details; cut-off date for booking Tuesday, March 12

REPORTS OF SUSSEX VISITS & EVENTS 2023

APRIL

Our *Behind the Scenes at Nymans* visit took place on a glorious spring morning, writes *Claire Farrer*. We were met by Joe Whelan, the knowledgeable head gardener, who took us on a full tour of the garden. This included the usually unseen propagation area (*below*) run by Charlene Chick-Seward, who has been at the National Trust garden for 14 years.



Throughout Joe talked about resilience and sustainability for the future of the garden. Where possible, trees are left in situ after falling to aid habitat

for insects and Nymans has been peat free for more than 16 years. Sadly, dry summers have had a significant effect on the rhododendrons, and this was a concern echoed by all the garden staff we met.

Of great interest was the “Garden in the Ruins” that has bespoke containers focused on planting related to Nymans or the Messel family who lived there and developed the garden. The tour concluded with the *Narcissus* cultivars bred and introduced by Noel Burr, part of the Sussex group’s dispersed collection.

MAY

The Borde Hill spring plant fair coincided with the King’s coronation celebration bank holiday weekend. The Sunday event at the Haywards Heath garden brought out the sunshine and nearly 1,000 visitors, *writes Maddy Ward*. The Grade II* gardens have been botanically rich for more than 125 years. An exhibition in the Africa glasshouse of archive material from two previous coronations was a bonus.

The plant stalls were situated in the Azalea Ring, with the Knaphill strains and the hybrid deciduous *Rhododendron Mollis* in full bloom. Many keen gardeners asked technical questions, which our volunteers answered with sound knowledge. We had time to sell most of the unusual plants that were kindly donated by members.

JUNE

Our pitch at the 15th-century Herstmonceux Castle in Hailsham, East Sussex, annual Plant Fair Roadshow was at the end of the chestnut tree avenue. Some of the trees are more than 300 years old, *writes Maddy Ward*.

It was a particularly hot Sunday for late June so we revelled in the shade provided by a lonely oak tree at the end of the avenue. Sadly, many nurseries said that the heat had been affecting sales. Many thanks to our



members who donated unusual plants. The public who came along to our stand were keen to ask questions and appreciated the professional advice they were given. They also shared some of their garden stories and concerns about environmental change. What came as a surprise was how few folk knew the name Plant Heritage, despite having heard of National Plant Collections from gardening shows on television.

JUNE

Architectural Plants have taken on something akin to mythical status among Sussex gardeners, writes *Steve Bustin*. You want something exotic? They have it. You want something big and mature? That's the place. You want to shop? Leave your credit card at home as this place is just too tempting.



***Dicksonia antarctica* and Guy Watts, the owner of Architectural Plants in Pulborough, West Sussex, and Peter Ward, the Sussex treasurer**

It's always a pleasure to visit a well-run and well-kept nursery and this place is as spectacular as its many, many plants. Aisles of tree ferns. Pathways lined with *Agapanthus*. Rows of perfect *Chamaerops*. Rarities and relative commoners rub branches in an ever-changing display of botanical treasures.

As Guy Watts, the owner, explained to the Sussex group, the nursery is now open by appointment only; it still sells about 70 per cent of stock retail with the other 30 per cent to the trade. He bemoaned the impact of the December 2022 cold spell (most plants lost were of New Zealand origin) but also told us proudly of their micro-propagation lab (not open to visitors unfortunately) and how that enables them to grow and sell plants that no other nursery can manage.

If you've not visited (or at least not since they moved from their retail plant centre in Nuthurst), then do make an appointment via the website (or just press the buzzer at the gate if you're passing). They're now hosting events from weddings to pop-up supper clubs and expanding their range into deciduous plants and lifestyle products. With a reputation and reach far beyond Sussex, they deserve every success. www.architecturalplants.com

NEW MEMBERS

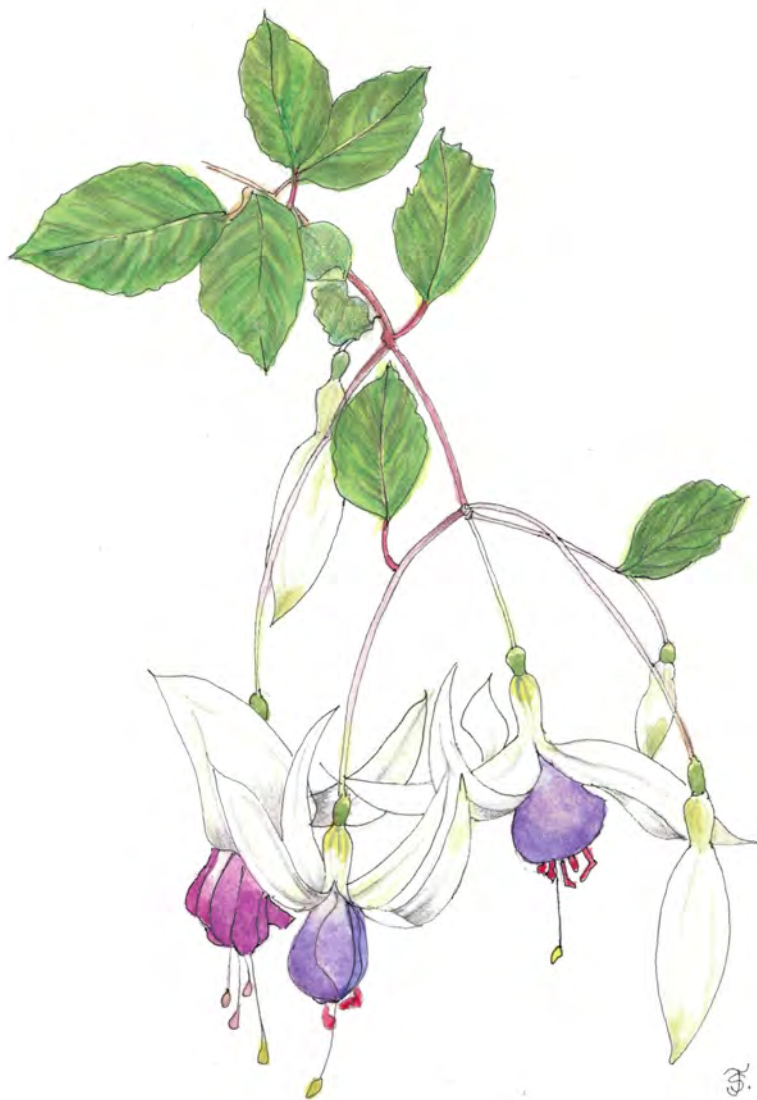
The committee is very pleased to welcome the following members:

Miss Amanda Border from East Grinstead; Mrs Alison Brown from Slinfold; Mr Michael Burton from Iping; Mr Barry Sims from Aldwick; and Ms Lesley Young from Hove. The committee and members look forward to meeting you at Wakehurst to celebrate the 45th anniversary of Plant Heritage, our talks at Haywards Heath or our other events.

Please introduce yourself to the person on the door or anyone at the plant fairs. We'd be delighted to meet you and introduce you to others.

SUSSEX RECOLLECTIONS

JENNY STEWART



I have always loved flowers; at an early age I copied drawings from books and went on to become a flower painter and an art historian. At my junior school there was a competition to see how many wild flowers we could collect on a walk in the countryside, only one of each was allowed and my tally was about 50.

I am not a traditional gardener. This was already evident when, lolling about on my empty plot at boarding school in Worcestershire, I was told off by my headteacher, a knowledgeable gardener and talented in all the arts. Lo and behold a Pheasant's Eye (*Adonis aestivalis*) appeared, far away from its native home in Eastern England, all was forgiven if I looked after it. I became a star - much to the annoyance of the other girls.

At home a packet of *Clarkia* thrown on to the soil grew into a fluorescent cloud, to the grudging approval of my father whose beautiful flowers were more regimented. This was in the Forties. I bought my first shrub rose 'Penelope' 20 years later from a farmer near Corhampton, Hampshire. No one was interested in his collection, so he planted them all in a corner of one of his fields.

JOINING UP

In the early Eighties a friend told me about the National Collection for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens (NCCPG). I thought that joining the Sussex group (I live on the Hampshire/Sussex border) would be exciting new territory to explore.

My first Sussex chairman had paid £400 of her own money to promote the group. A keen plantswoman and a formidable person was, on her own admission, a little eccentric with her labelling of plants. You were never quite sure what you might get. My spindle (*Euonymus europaeus*) turned into a goat willow (*Salix caprea*), which is now more than 10m (32ft) high and has clouds of golden catkins in the spring. I've kept it in her memory.

She wrote a six-page dissertation on "weeds", which was much scorned. It was a choice she said to admire the golden dandelions, the medicinal ground elder and the bindweed and also not to entirely ignore the

wildflowers in our gardens. Ignore the harmful pesticides. The wheel has turned full circle if Rachel de Thame in *The Telegraph* (“Only old-fashioned gardeners kill weeds”) is anything to go by. There is a happy medium.

The NCCPG did have some shaky times and I attended some interesting meetings - I remember one near Marlow, Bucks, where red kites had recently been introduced. Our host had a glass-fronted drawing room and the beautiful birds were wheeling and dipping over his lawn - he admitted feeding them. It was hard to concentrate on the matter in hand. Head office produced the “pink list” (its desiderata), which was a good idea, but the plants were so little known then we had to translate the botanical Latin to find out what they were.

GARDEN VISITS

The good news was that the National Plant Collections were growing apace to become the success they are today and because there were few gardening television programmes, lectures and meetings were well attended.

Garden visits were always popular. Highdown Gardens near Worthing in West Sussex was our signature garden. Everyone was fascinated by *Paeonia rockii*, the tree peony named after Joseph Rock. Seeds had been collected by its namesake Joseph Rock from a lamasery in China. A contemporary photograph shows the splashes of colour in the centre of the flower varied on each flower on a single plant. Some observers were adamant that the colour in the true species should be black.

High Beeches Woodland and Water Garden in West Sussex was a favourite with the then little-known *Eucryphia* - 8m high, producing their exquisite white flowers in early summer - and gentians in autumn. There was the *Wisteria* Collection at Pyrford Court in Surrey; the experimental planting of the Japanese iris (*Iris ensata*) by the water at Wakehurst; and a Sussex garden full of hydrangeas of every shape and size planted on sloping ground more easily to be admired. I bought a plant that should have produced ice-blue azure flowers, but because of my chalky soil were white.

Our early plant sales were held in the pretty iron-railed garden of Southover Grange in Lewes, East Sussex. The house was given over to a pottery where the talented designer, a great admirer of William Morris, produced wall tiles with beautiful detailed simple patterns of shells, fossils and fish. I have them to this day. Later sales were held in the beautiful grounds of Parham House and Gardens, Storrington, West Sussex. A summer funeral for one of the much-loved gardeners was held in the chapel there - a tiny silver sunlit aeroplane pierced the lofty clouds during the service. His coffin, paraded through the grounds, was painted by local schoolchildren with angels and demons on either side.

The beautiful gardens of Parham were designed by Lanning Roper, the landscape architect. The walkways were a revolutionary style, each one bordered with flowers in a single colour of varying shades. It was a work of art. Roper was also the designer of the gardens of another favourite visiting place – Firlie, the home of the Gage family (another branch of the family from Suffolk gave their name to the Reine Claude fruit imported from France in the first quarter of the 18th century). The nearby chapel has striking John Piper windows and there's a good pub in the village.

PLANT SALES

I was chairman for a few years after 2009, which I enjoyed very much. My husband had also previously been treasurer. It was a lively time with visits and later plant sales at the eight-acre Sussex Prairie Garden near Henfield, West Sussex, where pigs feasted on the acorns under the nearby oak trees and where the garden is traditionally put to fire at the end of February after the birds have had their fill of seeds. Gryllus and Formica were the pseudonyms of a writer who produced interesting articles for the Sussex newsletter in the mid 2000s. They were well written and produced plenty of discussion.

I have enjoyed all my time with Plant Heritage, made many good friends and learnt so much. Head office and the other groups have all contributed their valuable help to Sussex over the years. Thank you. Long may it last!

NOEL BURR: HOW IT ALL STARTED

IRMA WILLIAMSON

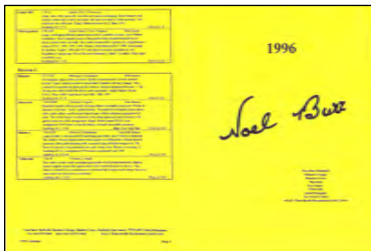


Noel Burr *Narcissus* in flower in Roger Parsons' growing area (all photographs by R. Parsons unless stated)

Noel Burr? Now why does that name ring a bell? Comfy chair, cat and catalogue - in this case bulbs from a well-known Cornish supplier. I had dealt with them for a year or so – the names taking me back to happy haunts. This was different – a daffodil with a Sussex name! ‘Five Ashes’, just down the road.

Noel Burr. Twenty-year-old memories fought their way to the surface, back from the Nineties. I hadn’t long moved to Buxted in East Sussex and joined the local horticultural society.

It was there that I heard the name Noel Burr, a friend of the then chairman John Small. Together they had been instrumental in forming the South East



England Daffodil Society. SEEDS was formed so that exhibitors had an alternative venue to the leading London RHS daffodil shows if they were not able to attend these. Noel grew daffodils locally, and won prizes nationally.

A 1996 Noel Burr catalogue

Now memory went into hiding and proved elusive. I remembered hearing that there was an open day where he lived and grew the daffodils. Super, thought I, popped mother into the car and set off for the great unknown. Well, Mayfield actually. Unfortunately, being me, I got the date wrong. All I can honestly remember is a drive down pretty East Sussex country lanes and peering through a gate and over a hedge. It all looked a bit of a wilderness but there were certain areas delineated and protected by netting or mesh. And yes, you could see the odd daffodil.

Back to reality and the 2000s. Curiosity piqued, I decided to google the man (other search engines are available!). My search led me through a number of websites including those of the American and Australian daffodil societies. I was seriously impressed and regretted that I hadn’t known about him earlier, but life has a habit of taking over.

Born in 1930 and a long time and much respected resident of Mayfield, he had died in 2017, dashing any vague hopes of meeting him. He first registered one of the daffodils he bred in 1969. Now largely forgotten, his bulbs once commanded eye-watering prices throughout the daffodil growing world. All were named after Sussex places, for example, ‘Hever’, ‘Five Ashes’, ‘Fletching’, ‘Southeast’; or had Sussex connections – ‘Dunstan’s Fire’ - St Dunstan, a Sussex man, was a 10th-century Archbishop of Canterbury who built a residential palace at Mayfield.

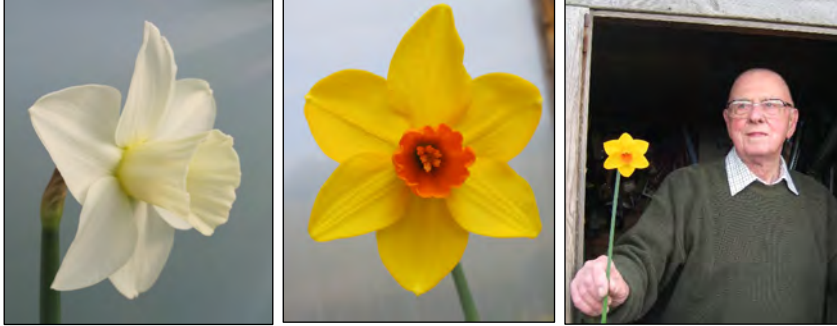


From left: ‘Hever’, ‘Fletching’ and ‘Southeast’

Apparently one of the final daffodils Noel bred was named ‘Piglet’, of Pooh and Ashdown Forest fame perhaps? Group member Roger Parsons tracked this down to a nursery in New Zealand and imported two bulbs in 2021. After a year adapting to the changed seasons of the northern hemisphere, it flowered with him this April.

My enthusiasm was well and truly fired. Forget the Celtic *Narcissus* collection I was thinking of building. This local guy and his life’s work deserved better than fading into obscurity. Of course, I bought some ‘Five Ashes’ that year; described in the catalogue thus: “We have been growing this for several years and it has impressed us with the strength of growth and size of flower, one of the best from Noel’s breeding.”

Each year when the new catalogue arrived I looked for Sussex names and eventually acquired several, thus becoming a happy if sadly inexperienced grower. They are mostly in aquatic plant pots sunk into the ground, so they can be lifted to avoid waterlogging on my heavy Sussex clay.



From left: ‘Five Ashes’, ‘Piglet’ and Noel Burr at his planting shed door with ‘Piglet’ (Source for Noel Burr: Daffnet.org)

My enthusiasm led me to mention Noel and his bulbs to Gary Firth, then chairman of the Sussex group, telling him what a great advert for Sussex the man and his achievements were. Little did I know that I had fired the starting pistol for what would become the proposed dispersed Plant Heritage National Collection of Noel Burr *Narcissi* cultivars.

- The author has been a Sussex member since the Nineties
- This summer Roger Parsons succeeded Gary as the collection’s co-ordinator. Roger likes to grow his bulbs in deep pots, one bulb to a 4l pot. This helps to maintain the health of the bulbs and ensures they don’t get neglected. A well-drained compost is used. This season, Roger will be trying the peat-free Melcourt Sylvamix Potting with about 10 per cent perlite added. Bulbs in pots need protection from hard frosts. Traditionally, the pots were plunged in sand or ashes but Roger keeps his in a well-ventilated polytunnel. Come the spring, the pots are placed outdoors to keep them cool but they can be kept in a glasshouse or polytunnel until after flowering, to ensure clean blooms for cut flowers. Throughout April and May, the pots are well watered and once a week are fed with sulphate of potash. This helps to build up the size and quality of the bulbs for the following season. After May, water is withheld and the foliage dies down; in July the bulbs are

emptied from their pots, cleaned and examined, then stored somewhere cool and dry until restarting the cycle in September or October.

- Members who would like to become dispersed collection growers can collect spare bulbs grown by Gary and Roger at the AGM.

SUSSEX GROUP COMMITTEE

President: Mrs Eleni Stephenson Clarke

Joint chairmen:

Andrew Gaunt, Andrew.Gaunt@apha.gov.uk

Madelaine Ward, madelaineward@aol.com

Collections Coordinator: Dr Gary Firth, themyrtleman@gmail.com

Communications: Sue Norgrove-Moore, suenorgrove@hotmail.com

Membership secretary: Jenny Stewart, jenny@jsillustrator.co.uk

Minutes and events: Madelaine Ward

Plant Exchange: Steve Law, brighton.plants@gmail.com

Treasurer: Peter Ward, peterjward@doctors.org.uk

Other committee members:

Kate Berry, katehod@gmail.com

Claire Farrer, cfarrer7@gmail.com

Marguerite Wright, mimi.cs@ntlworld.com

Non-committee: Clare Hogan, [sussexphed@gmail.com](mailto:sussephed@gmail.com)

SEARCH OUR WEBSITE

Members can find all manner of events, open days and talks at nearby counties and the ones organised by national office on the website www.plantheritage.org.uk

MY FAVOURITE POT

MARGUERITE WRIGHT

Of my unreasonably large number of pots, one serves a multiple role. It shines during the spring and then again in late summer, occupying a focal point in the garden.

The large (about 45cm) ridged, chunky, pale terracotta pot may have to work hard but then so do I to fill it with tulips and later with dahlias in rotation. Which came first, the dahlia or the tulip? I can't remember.



Every autumn, I succumb to temptation and order yet more bulbs. The brightest and craziest tulips will be reserved for this pot.

First, I need to check the existing compost. If I remembered nematode treatment for vine weevil well and good, otherwise a bright hour during the short, dark November days is needed for very careful inspection and removal of beastly little grubs and millipedes.

A profusion of tulips (All photographs: Marguerite Wright)

I welcome the orange centipedes zooming around in the compost, to which I add some grit for drainage.

Instructions for filling pots with a so-called “bulb lasagne” assume you will be using a variety of bulbs - largest at the bottom. I don’t want my tulips too shallow, so do only two deep layers; close together but not touching and try to stagger their position a little.

For the past few years I have mixed purple and pink forms of *T. ‘Victoria’s Secret’*, managing to cram in about 30 altogether. These are parrot varieties, like mad, exploding, frilly underwear!



Tulipa
**‘Victoria’s
Secret’**

So that the pot isn’t too empty and boring after the winter, I plant a shallow layer of sacrificial crocuses. The tulips are at risk from digging mice and birds and the crocuses even more so. To protect the bulbs, I usually leave a weighted-down terracotta saucer on top of the pot for a month or two, though it doesn’t look very nice. Last year I didn’t, having added impulse-buy violas that actually survived!

I grow all my dahlias in pots. There's no way their emerging shoots would survive the slugs and snails in my crowded Brighton garden. Over-wintered bare, dry and frost-free in the cellar, in March they get potted up into 20cm pots in the unheated greenhouse awaiting their summer quarters.

When the pot tulips have had their weeks of glory, they are carefully removed. It's a challenge not to break them. I have tried first feeding and then drying in smaller plastic pots in the hope of finding some of flowering size for the following year but have inevitably failed or they get eaten by the greenhouse mice during the summer. Frilly knicker tulips never seem to reappear when replanted, apart from *T.* 'Spring Green'. More sophisticated *T.* 'White Triumphator' and *T.* 'Queen of the Night' also seem moderately perennial. I am currently steeling myself to be realistic and just throw the old bulbs on to the compost.



**Tulip 'Wachtnacht'
and 'White
Triumphator'**

I'd rather spend on plants than compost, so preparing the large pots for their summer occupants necessitates enriching with garden compost and comfrey or chicken poo pellets and, especially, some sort of moisture retainer. I have some "water slices". These are shrivelled little reusable discs that, when soaked, expand dramatically into large, squelchy sponges. They look absolutely disgusting when removed from the bottom of pots in the autumn. In addition to revitalised slices, I intend to try mixing in leftover sphagnum moss from Christmas wreath-making, to improve water retention.

My most exuberant dahlia is 'Café au Lait'. Now three years large, last year it had a companion 'Café au Lait Royal', which died. This year I have some *Gladiolus murielae* (acidanthera) waiting in the wings (greenhouse) to join the dahlias. When all are tucked in, with some bamboo stakes to support later growth, I will sprinkle a layer of wool pellets on the surface. This acts as both mulch and slug/snail deterrent; the wool is too itchy to slither on. Allegedly.

Preparation over, I can wait for a splendid summer display. All that's needed now is moderate watering, snail checks, tying in to supports and deadheading; until November, when the dahlias come out and the whole routine starts again . . .

THE INSIDE TRACK

GARY and MARIA FIRTH

Report from the Sussex Collection Coordinators 2023

Our coordinator visits have been limited this year because we concentrated on our joint Australasian Plant Society/Hebe Society display at Hampton Court Palace Garden Festival. Planning starts about nine months before the event with the application to the RHS followed by a rather lengthy process of paperwork, design, procurement of plants and props and liaison with the 20 or so volunteers who will help with set-up and manning the stand.

March 3: attended another busy Plant Collections Committee meeting

via Zoom where the application by The Mathers Foundation for a collection of *Pleione* species and cultivar orchids was awarded Full Collection status subject to a satisfactory coordinator visit. This collection had previously been held as a National Collection by Ian Butterfield.



April 14: Maria and I visited Gill and David Mathers in West Sussex (photographed above by Maria) to formally view the collection of *Pleione* when in flower. Needless to say, under the guidance of Jim Durrant, the head grower, the orchids were looking in first-class condition and we were pleased to be able to send a positive coordinator report to national office.

May 16: Worth Park in Crawley, West Sussex, was developed by the Montefiore family. The original mansion on the site became a girls' school before being demolished in the Sixties. Maria and I had been invited to give a talk to 25 former pupils on the conservation role of Plant Heritage and the *Achillea*, *Camellia* and Noel Burr *Narcissus* collections being developed at Worth Park. This seemed to be very well received, with many of the audience going home with *Achillea* cultivars we had produced from seed.



Achilleas at Worth Park (photographs by Maria Firth)

June 22: made a further visit to the *Rhododendron* (Ghent azaleas) collection at NT Sheffield Park Garden. We were very pleased to see that significant progress had been made with the labelling, cultivation and recording under the guidance of Jodie Foster, the senior gardener. We will now review the collection on our normal two or three-yearly cycle.



June 29-July 9: set up our joint plant display (*pictured above by Gary*) in the Plant Heritage area of the Floral Marquee. We were pleased to be awarded a Silver Medal.

BREATH TAKING BEAUTY IN BHUTAN

GILL MATHERS

The chance to see *Pleione* orchids growing in their natural habitat and a mission to donate a collection of *The Orchids of Bhutan* to the Royal Botanical Garden inspired our remarkable travels to *Druk Yul* “Land of the Thunder Dragon” earlier this year.

Landlocked between India and China, Bhutan is one of the smallest countries in Asia, occupying just 38,394sq km (14,824sq miles) with diverse habitats for wildlife from snow-capped mountains and deep valleys in the North to subtropical lowlands in the South.

Bhutan is thought to have more than 500 species of orchids (representing nearly 10 per cent of all plant species in the country) including several that are critically endangered. Our journey would allow us to meet some of their guardians but also to delve into the history and culture of this fascinating region.

Travelling to Bhutan is not easy. Until the Seventies, Bhutan was isolated from the world but it was admitted as a member of the United Nations in 1971 and gradually started opening up. The government is acutely aware of the environmental impact tourists can have on the unspoilt landscape and culture and so visitors are required to have a visa and pay a tourist tax each day as part of a guided tour. Our journey took us via the lush, tropical city of Delhi in India, and the contrast to the extraordinary serenity of Bhutan made our arrival like stepping into another world.

Buddhism is a way of life in Bhutan and family, traditions, landscapes and culture are threads that weave into everything you see from red-robed monks to cows grazing along the roadside. Nature is everywhere with more than 75 per cent forest cover. Economic exploitation of Bhutan’s natural resources has been protected by legislation that prioritises preservation and today it is one of the few carbon-negative countries in the world.

There are no mountain tunnels, no traffic lights and only two emergency helicopters so journeys are via twisting mountainous roads or scheduled flights when the weather is kind. We flew to Bumthang in the East over the snow-capped Himalayas, the only Westerners on a small turbo prop plane. Only local pilots can fly because of the dangers but this option was much quicker and picturesque than taking the arduous ten-hour road route.

Bumthang and Gangtey were perhaps our favourite destinations with the peaceful tranquillity of the high-elevation rural regions slowing down our usual hectic pace of life. Blue pine forests dominated the landscape with monasteries, dzongs (ancient fortresses), stupas (a reliquary) and prayer flags along the routes usually in high places because these are considered spiritual homes of the guardian deities.

SCENTED DAPHNE

Spring was just around the corner so days were bright and crisp; the willows along the riverbanks were starting to bud, there were banks of delicate violet primroses and the perfume of daphne bushes drifted through the forest paths. After daytime hikes in the blue pine forests (*Pinus wallichiana*), we relaxed by learning archery with the lodge staff. One evening we watched sacred alpine black cranes coming to roost in the marshes and on our final day had the honour to be invited to a local school for the King's birthday celebration. School children and teachers performed colourful dances in their national costume. A sign there read "Nature is not a place to visit – it is home".

Punakha, famed for its beautiful dzong on the confluence of two rivers, was our next stop. As we crossed a misty mountain pass the landscape changed from pine to oak forests and we started to spot epiphytic orchids in the trees, yaks grazing and our first troop of langur monkeys lazily watching us. Orchids are difficult to identify when not in flower but the abundance of them dripping from the branches brought us cheer. Punakha is in a valley at 1,200m (4,000ft), almost tropical with paddy fields growing both red and white rice and lush organic vegetables including chillies.



**Bhutan - wild orchids on tree
(all photographs:
Gill Mathers)**

Our lodge this time was reached by crossing a rope suspension bridge - not my favourite.

Hiking had, however, become much more interesting and the next day, followed by friendly stray dogs, we visited a monastery and saw *Cymbidium hookerianum* in a pot outside. We have this beautiful green orchid species in our National

Collection and seeing it was a real highlight until I learnt to my horror that in Bhutan its flower buds are eaten.

Our guide explained that a few different species including *C. hookerianum* and *C. erythraeum* are often found in local markets and the flowers are eaten in a dish called *ola choto*, a type of pork stew with yak cheese and chilli. The orchid buds give it a slightly bitter flavour. Luckily for us it was not the season for orchid eating.

Still in shock with my discovery of orchid consumption the next day we headed into Thimphu, the capital, stopping on the way at the Royal Botanical Park, a nature reserve on the outskirts. Our guide had arranged for a local ranger to show us around and we chatted about the upcoming red panda survey and local hummingbirds. It was springtime so we were not expecting to find orchids in flower so early in the season but close to the lake there were about ten *Pleione humilis* in flower - white with red lip -

nestled into the moss-covered tree trunk. My smile could not have been broader; it was one of the highlights of our trip.



Left to right: food market with *Cymbidium* sp. and chillies and *Cymbidium hookerianum* in the Royal Botanical Garden

Next stop was the Royal Botanical Garden. Here the botanists from the National Biodiversity Centre rescue and care for orchids that have been displaced by hydroelectric and road projects in the region.

Hydroelectricity is one of the three major contributors to the economy followed by agriculture and tourism. The orchid house in the garden was home to an array of species from the critically endangered *Paphiopedilum fairreanum*, a newly identified (and already propagated) leafless orchid, *Chiloschista gelepense* to *Dendrobium*, *Bulbophyllum*, *Cymbidium*, *Calanthe* and *Pleione*. We were delighted to deliver the donated books from Dr Phillip Cribb, one of the authors, and see around the orchid propagation unit. The future is in propagation and education and we hope to connect the scientists with some of the leading orchid experts in the UK to assist them with their conservation work.

On our last day we undertook the epic climb to the Tiger’s Nest Monastery (Paro Taktsang). Located on a cliffside, this sacred Buddhist site was constructed in 1692 around the cave where Guru Rinpoche first meditated, the event that introduced Buddhism into Bhutan. There is a legend that Guru Rinpoche was carried from Tibet to this location on the back of a tigress. A long hike to the top, where snow started to fall, was stunning – a fitting end to an incredible adventure of orchids, wildlife and the beauty of Bhutan.



An epic climb to the Tiger’s Nest Monastery (Paro Taktsang)

- The author and her husband David hold the *Oncidium* and *Pleione* National Plant Collections in The Mathers Foundation

FOR THE RECORD

Please note that there was an accidental transposition during editing of the photographs in *Wild Clary* (spring 2023): photo p.28 is Meadow Clary close-up (see p32) and photo p.32 Wild Clary, with darker and less showy flowers than Meadow Clary.