

'PRIMROSES' - A TALK BY JOE SHARMAN

Sue Lander

Joe Sharman, our speaker, began crossing and hybridising primulas many years ago but in 2007 became obsessed with them. In his talk he concentrated on the species primulas, namely *vulgaris*, *veris*, *elatior* and their hybrids.

He used an interesting term for the garden centre primroses: buy and die! Joe is interested in the old varieties and the survivors. *Primula vulgaris* ranges from Sweden right down to Gibraltar, Iraq and Iran and has a huge range. Interestingly, the flower colour is yellower in colder, northern areas.

The feathered primroses are finger-like, with the calyx split into five. Green primroses go right back to Gerard and Parkinson in 1612; there are single and doubles. The petals become leaf-like which means that the flowers last longer, as they are sterile. In the hose-in-hose varieties, the calyx becomes the second flower around the first flower. *Primula vulgaris* 'Alba Plena' - a double - is very vigorous with orange eyes. *P. vulgaris* var. *pulchella* comes from the island of Andros. It has smaller flowers with star-like orange eyes and is a good doer. *P. vulgaris* subsp. *balearica* from Majorca survive because of snowmelt. They may be threatened and have sticky, hairy leaves and scented white flowers. *P. vulgaris* subsp. *sibthorpii* hail from Greece, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and Iran at low altitude. John Tradescant found it in 1638 and it ranges from white to dark purple. *P. vulgaris* 'Lilacina Plena' is a double sport of *sibthorpii* and is a good plant.

On one of Joe's expeditions in Turkey he saw, above 900m, the alpine form of *P. vulgaris*, which is brighter in colour and has crowns underground. The white eye ring comes from *P. vulgaris* subsp. *sibthorpii*. At 900m, the high and low primulas meet and hybridise. In Turkey he saw sheets of them covering acres: a spectacular sight. They grow in hazelnut plantations and are mown over the top as the crowns are underground.

Primula elatior (oxlip) comes from ancient wood habitats of sticky boulder clay. It uniquely adapts by going dormant in summer to survive. (I remember seeing some of my primroses had died right back and I assumed that I had lost them, but now I know that it is their usual behaviour!) Oxlips occupy areas the primrose doesn't, therefore they are found in central France and Germany. In the 1960s, David Valentine crossed *P. juliae* with the wild oxlip. The first cross that he selected was named after him, the second seedling he named 'Duchess of York'. *P. amoena* and 'Cisca' are good for dry areas being drought tolerant.

The cowslip, *P. veris* loves dry, chalky, sunny places. The common cowslip crossed with primrose is called *variabilis* and was the starting point for polyanthus Bowles hybrids. Any hybrid is called a bastard! They come in a range of colours from pale orange, yellow, orange to crimson.

Joe then went on to tell us what primroses people had created. The gold-lace polyanthus, silver-lace appeared first. The hose-in-hose gold-lace is very rare. There is a gold-lace Jack-in-the-Green. The silver-lace x blue produced a silver-lace double blue which sadly died out. *P.* 'Buckland Wine' from Devon is still around. *P.* 'Enchantress' has a nice pink pattern; *P.* 'Marie Crousse' has white flecking and is a good plant, and *P.* 'Red Paddy' stems from the 1890s.

P. juliae, from Georgia, 1902, is known as the waterfall plant. It has a creeping habit, one inch high and is a good parent plant. Other good plants are *P.* 'Hall Barn Blue', *P.* 'Kinlough Beauty' and *P.* 'Tomato Red'.

P. 'Guinevere' came from Ireland in the 1930's and is a good parent plant with purple leaves and is the parent of 'Innisfree' raised by Joe Kennedy. *P.* 'Dark Rosaleen' is a good doer and green *P.*

'Francisca' was found in a pile of rejected plants in Portland, Oregon. It is one of my favourites. The Barnhaven primroses, now based in France, come in a range of rich colours and almost no eye. The spice shades are a particular favourite. There is also a midnight strain. *P.* 'Paris' has a blue picotee edge. *P.* 'Don Keefe' is a good warm red. One of Joe's seedlings he named 'Fred's Favourite' and has a good scent. *P.* 'Dawn Ansell' is a double white. We mustn't forget *P.* 'Sue Jervis', a remarkable soft pink and such a good doer. Primroses are now being micropropagated, which should eradicate viruses. I have recently bought *P. vulgaris* 'Viridis', which was difficult to grow because of virus but hopefully I have acquired a clean plant.



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Primula 'Sue Jervis'

Well, what a lecture. No notes needed from Joe but copious ones from me! He is a remarkable plantsman with amazing knowledge. He also brought plants for sale which made the afternoon very enjoyable.

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