

Letters

Plant hunters

At a recent lecture given by Roy Lancaster at Writtle College in Essex, we were surprised to hear him mention the Lobb brothers, William and Thomas, together with a slide showing a display case holding cones, seeds and leaves from plant-hunting expeditions in the Americas. Roy had received the slide from Matthew Biggs, as a celebration of the Lobb Brothers was held at Hampton Court Palace Flower Show in July 2010.

We're much involved in our local village hall at Ramsden Bellhouse and our hall committee chairman, Clive Jeffree, knows that we're interested in horticulture, and members of the HPS. Clive had come to see us several months earlier, bringing with him this display case, a recent legacy from his cousin, a 92-year-old member of the Jeffree family.

Clive had long known that he was a direct descendant of the Lobb brothers; he's visited the cottage in Cornwall where they were all born and brought up, and he has various artefacts relating to them. The brothers were sponsored by James Veitch from his nursery at Exeter, William to the tune of £300–400, at that time a considerable sum.

The plant collecting took place during the 1840s and 1850s. William travelled extensively on two expeditions through South America, and one to North America. He discovered many plants, including *Fagus antarctica* and *F. betuloides*, *Embothrium coccineum*, *Desfontainia spinosa*, *Gaultheria* and three species of *Berberis*. He also found *Crinodendron hookerianum*, *Ceanothus x veitchianus* and *Thuja plicata*. Although the monkey puzzle tree, *Araucaria araucana*, and the wellingtonia, *Sequoiadendron giganteum*, had been discovered earlier, insufficient seeds had been sent back to make the trees commercially available; William sent back over 3000 seeds, which Veitch propagated, and the trees became such an instant hit that people were scrambling to buy them!

Clive Jeffree was invited to join the Essex Group at our February meeting when, as custodian of this historic collection, he gave us a presentation and showed us the display case.

Tony & Celia Rogers, Basildon



All the writers are responding to Vol. 31 No. 2 Autumn 2010.

On *Smyrniium perfoliatum*

This may be of interest to Val Bourne (p. 68), who was having difficulty growing *Smyrniium perfoliatum*. It's important to remember that this plant is monocarpic but not biennial. It takes three years to reach flowering size. Seed sown fresh comes up like mustard and cress but only seed leaves are produced the first year, and soon die down. However, this is enough to form a tiny bulb about an inch down. The following year the true leaves appear, and in the third year it flowers. It is easier to sow direct in the ground, but if you must sow in pots, which are preferable to shallow seed trays, wait till the winter to prick out, when the seedlings are dormant. Turn the pot out and search for the tiny bulbils which will have formed, and put up to three in a small pot, about an inch deep.

I have had this plant growing for years in an open situation in ordinary soil. It has naturalized and we have flowers every year. **Fay Bowling**, Macclesfield

***Clematis cirrhosa* var. *purpurascens* 'Lansdowne Gem'**

I was most interested to read Margaret Montrose's letter praising the merits of *C. cirrhosa* var. *purpurascens* 'Lansdowne Gem' (p. 70). This plant, a sport of *C. cirrhosa* var. *purpurascens* 'Freckles', was spotted in 1995 by nurseryman Michael Jerard of Christchurch, New Zealand, and was introduced by him into general cultivation in 1997. I was fortunate to receive a plant, soon after its introduction, from Mr Jerard. Mindful of the fact the plant was not fully hardy I gave it a sheltered, frost-free, sunny position in my walled garden. It grew strongly and flowered well.

While I agree with Margaret that excellent drainage and 50cm of good topsoil may have enabled her plant to withstand prolonged periods of frost and snow to emerge unscathed to reward her with flowers, cirrhosas – species and cultivars – on the whole are not fully hardy across the British Isles. Hence it is advisable to give the plants a sheltered and warm spot in any garden. Furthermore cirrhosas, according to the water-wise, Mediterranean gardener Heidi Gildemeister, should not be watered on a regular basis and particularly during their period of summer dormancy. Let the plant enjoy its dormancy and get ready for winter flowering. It's also good to remember that cirrhosas are natives of Southern Europe and the Mediterranean borders from Spain to Israel and also North Africa, and are not thirsty plants.

Incidentally, my 'Freckles' survived our very cold 2009–10 winter and has come through freezing air and ground temperatures (at times between –10 to –14 °C) in

December 2010. I was pleasantly surprised to see my 20-year old plant, covered in snow and ice for approximately 3 weeks, flaunting its numerous pendulous flowers when the long-awaited thaw arrived. On the other hand, a plant in my friend's garden simply succumbed to the exceptionally severe winter temperatures and looks naked and sad. Maybe it will wake up with new green shoots from beneath the soil once spring arrives. I do hope so.

And finally, some plants of 'Lansdowne Gem' on sale are of inferior quality, and the flowers tend not to exhibit some desirable characteristics similar to those of the original plant. Beware.

Mary Toomey, Dublin

Organic gardening and slugs

A. Scott's letter (p. 72) on organic gardening ends with the provocative question: 'Slugs... who cares about them?' Well, I do....

Back in my youth, a friend and I were once asked by a slightly sceptical policeman why we were lurking in the local woodland in the middle of the night. I explained: "He's watching badgers, and I'm studying slugs". As we were armed only with torches, notebooks and packed breakfasts, he believed us. His report probably noted "mad teenagers"....

Now a mad pensioner, I am writing to point out that our molluscan neighbours are not quite the Devil's Slime that gardeners tend to think of them as – even though the buggers (A. Scott's term) are a plague in my garden, as are their hard-cased friends *Helix aspersa*, well-named the Garden Snail.

Jane and I garden organically, although her veg plots and some things in pots are girdled in copper bands in case the eggshell, coffee grounds, and sheep wool don't work. (They don't.) I look askance at the copper, recalling the zoology professor who in a year collected and removed 54,000 or so slugs on a nightly walk round his urban garden – and after 3 or 4 years of the same had an annual tally of about 50,000. As the bulk of the population lives down in the soil, recolonisation of the surface is fast, and predictable.

What I don't understand is why our laid-back, organic, and wildlife-rich plot has so many, and why few of the other gardeners in the village have the same problem, while several other locals – some organic and some not – say "What problem?" Perhaps the molluscs, as well as (I mean despite) the amphibians, slow-worms, badgers and birds, know we want our garden to double as a nature reserve.

I haven't given up – though I wish we had fewer. I'm trying to accept that we live with them, it isn't easy! However, at least outside the vegetable beds I suggest life can be less stressful – and somewhat more eco-friendly – if one lives not by the

rallying call ‘If at first you don’t succeed, try, try, try again!’ but by the more realistic ‘If you don’t succeed twice, grow something else!’

There are plenty to choose from. One thing, however, would save much sorrow: a new symbol in the *Plant Finder* to indicate ‘generally slug resistant’. One for Dr. Kingsbury and a survey of HPS members perhaps?

Meanwhile, do look at your molluscs. Okay: many are drab, but many shells are beautiful, and the skin patterning of some slugs is too. Most slug species are not troublemakers. Many are busy helping to break down and recycle dead plant tissue. Many have fascinating, complex behaviour, not least some incredible sex lives (I thought it best not to mention that to the policeman).

Surely gardening shouldn’t be a battle against Nature. Of course not: we can’t win. And it would be (I mean is) folly to kill ourselves while trying to.

This is why I’m a bit sceptical about some of the growing enthusiasm for so-called green, ecofriendly, and/or wildlife gardening. Our efforts are very selective, and very biased. There are hints of this in recent articles. Barbara Shaw has picked up some of them.

Eating organic vegetables (who eats inorganic ones?) is all very well – but not if they have travelled halfway round the globe, leaving a pollution trail behind them. If they’re home-grown, fine – unless we’ve bought in loads of compost and ‘feed’ to keep them going. Setting aside a piece of the lawn as a ‘wildflower meadow’ to attract insects, etc. is all very well – but not if the nursery supplying an increasing demand for plants has just cleared a patch of scrub to erect polytunnels to grow them in, and sells them in plastic pots. Aren’t such examples contradictions? We cause damage for the best of reasons! Mea culpa – the copper in my garden, for example, is a tiny bit of an increasingly scarce resource, and I have a pile of plastic pots ‘to dispose of’.

And then there are the vain hopes. What wildlife will the meadow-patch, or pond, or native-species-hedge attract if the surroundings are a biodiversity desert? Not a lot: we’ve already killed much of it. Some things will appear – but probably only the usual common ones.

Perhaps that’s one reason why a few kinds of slug are such pests. We make our gardens into potentially cosy habitats for them, kill off a lot of their predators, and plant out luscious food for them. Don’t blame them for liking it there!

Martin Spray, Forest of Dean

Grasses

I must just say that I couldn’t agree more with Alex Pankhurst (p. 76) about grasses and am delighted to know I’m not alone!

Jennifer Hewitt, Shropshire