



Fig. 1 Lynne Lawson selecting plants for pollination, February 2016.



Fig. 2 *Primula* Grand Canyon group. A Florence Bellis strain.



Fig. 3 *Primula* Striped Victorian group. Dating back to the 1950s.



Fig. 4 *Primula* Venetian Cowichan group, with the lack of yellow eye characteristic of the Cowichans.

In 1966 I chose the establishment of Mr and Mrs J W Sinclair (in the UK) to carry on Barnhaven. When I sent them what were then the most stunning primroses ever produced, I was enraptured to find that each succeeding generation they later produced ... surpassed the last. In the first few decades of those 50 years, Barnhaven had built the bridge that spanned the interval between an English hobby and a universally beloved spring flower; in the last decades millions of Barnhaven creations have been incorporated and lost to the high-powered primrose industries flourishing worldwide today. Can the challenge be met? Or will the mantle of Barnhaven III prove too heavy?'

Florence Bellis, the founder of Barnhaven, wrote this in *Gardening and Beyond* in 1986. It is 80 years since Florence Bellis moved into her 'barn' in Oregon and sowed her first few packets of *Primula polyanthus* seed, and 30 years since she wrote this on the sleeve of her book, two years before the Sinclairs

The 80th anniversary of Barnhaven Primroses

Jodie Mitchell

retired and Barnhaven moved to France to be continued by Angela Bradford. Barnhaven IV is now based in Brittany and in the hands of my father and mother, David and Lynne Lawson, whom my husband Rob Mitchell and I joined five years ago. They are the current holders not only of the French National Collection of Barnhaven Primrose hybrids and a certified collection of *Primula auricula*, but also a huge range of European primulas, Asiatic species, *P. sieboldii*, and many others.

What makes Barnhaven Primroses special?

Florence Bellis's founding vision of colour and her mantra of producing hardy garden-worthy plants is still very much at the heart of everything we do. We use the same methods of hand-pollination, and rigorously select our Barnhaven seed strains.

Many people who see how painstaking and time consuming this is struggle to understand why we believe it is really necessary, especially at a time when many plants are so easily mass-produced by in-vitro propagation. When people ask what on earth we are doing, I conjure up in my mind the picture of Florence sitting on her gas heater in the dark with a torch strapped to her head, and say, with a resounding 'Yes', that like our predecessors we are a bit crazy but we sincerely believe that this is the only way to do it, to maintain the genetic diversity that is present in the old strains and to safeguard the range of colours and forms.

Of course, in February, with freezing fingers and toes and dropping with exhaustion, we sometimes wonder whether it is all worth it. But then in spring we see our customers searching through the plants on offer for the exact colour they had in mind; we hear people stop at our stand at the plant fairs gasping 'I never knew there were so many different primroses'; we get emails from the other side of the world extolling the virtues of our double primroses; and we see some of the new buds unfurling; and well, we feel somehow it is all worth it.

Hardiness is still an essential feature of our plants and we cultivate them either in shade tunnels or in traditional tunnels with their sides open to the elements to ensure that they are exposed to as much of the

cold weather as possible for easy transition to the garden. All our seed is harvested and cleaned by hand, and stored in optimal conditions to guarantee that only best quality seed is offered.

Safeguarding our legacy

As with any important anniversary, this past year has been a time for us to take stock and to reflect on our aims for the collection. At the core of our work is the conviction that what we are doing is safeguarding the genetic legacy of the existing strains. Most of the original Barnhaven strains, created by Florence Bellis, the Sinclairs and Angela Bradford, are still going, and no external genetic material has been added. Florence Bellis introduced many of our polyanthus strains such as 'Grand Canyon' (fig. 2), 'Indian Reds', and 'Harvest Yellows'. Most of the Victorian polyanthus strains, the Cowichans and the Juliana strains also date back to the 1940s–1950s. The Sinclairs in the UK also introduced many beautiful seed strains, including 'Midnight' and 'Daybreak' (fig. 5) which are some of my favourites. And I think we are justified in saying that if we didn't undertake the painstaking work of meticulously selecting the best mother plants and pollinating them with numb fingers and the help of lots of cups of tea, no one else would do it and the exquisite plants resulting from all those years of work would simply disappear.

For the same reason, we are adding to our collection many old cultivars which are in



Fig. 5 *Primula* Daybreak group, a Sinclair introduction.



Fig. 6 *Primula* 'Lady Greer' – an old Irish Juliana cultivar.



Fig. 7 Double primrose 'Val Horncastle'.



Fig. 8 *Primula veris* hose-in-hose form Lady Agatha group.



Fig. 9 *Primula veris* hose-in-hose form Lord Alfred group.



Fig. 10 New Pixie Primroses Group.



Fig. 11 'Strawberries and Cream', a new cultivar of a small-stalked Juliana.



Fig. 12 *P. sieboldii* 'Apple Blossom' group, a reintroduction of an old strain.

danger of disappearing, such as 'Lady Greer' (fig. 6) and 'David Valentine', and many of the old forms of double primroses including 'Val Horncastle' (fig. 7) and 'Quaker's Bonnet'. Our auricula collection is also growing, and keeping a record of the history and origins of these fascinating plants is an important part of our work. It's not a case of compiling a living museum, but rather maintaining the plants in cultivation so that as many people as possible can continue to enjoy them in their own gardens.

At the heart of our hybridising programme is wanting to bring back to life some of the very old forms and strains which have been lost. We recently introduced two seed strains of hose-in-hose cowslips, yellow 'Lady Agatha' (fig. 8) and red and orange 'Lord Alfred' (fig. 9). These names are based on those given to these forms in the 19th century. Lynne has been working on some of the smaller-stalked Juliana primroses which Florence Bellis called her Pixie primroses (fig. 10). These miniature polyanthus used to be an important part of Barnhaven's production, and we will be introducing one of these new strains this autumn (fig. 11).

A very significant part of the Sinclairs' contribution to the collection were the strains of *P. sieboldii*. We had all the beautiful descendants of the plants that Jared Sinclair had worked on so passionately, but we were selling them in just four mixtures, mainly because of lack of time at the seed-packaging stage when we were still pollinating

14 different forms and separate colours. In some of the 1970s catalogues Jared Sinclair had over 30 different strains for sale. In his breeding he insisted on producing vigorous garden-worthy plants that had thicker stems and more substantial petals than many of the Japanese cultivars at that time. These characteristics remain the centre of our breeding programme, and we're gradually reintroducing some of the old strains such as 'Apple Blossom' (fig. 12).

Our plans for the future – new introductions

But ... and it is big but, we are not just looking backwards. Creating new strains and cultivars is a huge part of our work and obviously one of the most exciting. It generally takes 5–6 years to fix, or stabilise, a new variety, and quite often it can end up on the compost heap when we decide we don't like it after all, or it is too similar to another.

Lynne's passion for double primroses is a big part of our production and her doubles are slowly taking over more space on the benches. As we have struggled to keep up with the demand, some of our doubles are now being micropropagated, but it's an awfully long time before they appear in the market. We generally observe the plants of each cultivar for a year or two to assess them before sending them away to the lab for initiation, which is not always successful the first time. We then receive sample plants which we have to check for form and colour; and finally

we receive the plants ready for selling. Sometimes there are problems in the lab and all the plants are lost – it's by no means a simple matter.

We also divide a certain number by hand, so that we can offer a larger selection, and in 2015 we started selling unnamed double primroses by colour. We are introducing several new ones this autumn, notably 'Snowgoose' (fig. 13), a new white double with strong stems and fresh bright green foliage, and 'Purple Storm' (fig. 14), with ravishingly velvety shades of purple and darker tints to the back of the petals.

Auriculas

When David and Lynne took over in 2000, Barnhaven was just selling border auricula plants and seeds. Shortly afterwards David made the mistake (or not) of buying his first few show auriculas, which quickly grew into a collection filling a whole tunnel. We now have over 300 cultivars and the collection is rapidly growing with new introductions regularly added, for example 'Trafalgar Square' (fig. 15) and 'Pink Floyd' have been added to this year's catalogue. After 26 years of Barnhaven's presence in France, auriculas are finally finding a place in a few French hearts and at shows it's lovely to see how they appeal to all age groups, from the very young to the very old. Although auriculas have their origins in the French Alps and they were once very popular, for example there was an auricula theatre at Versailles, they had been completely forgotten and are entirely unknown to

most of the French public. We have added to our range some hand-pollinated seed from show auriculas which is proving very sought after, and although breeding show auriculas is not a priority for us, we always sow a few packets and occasionally name something really exceptional, such as the very popular Fancy auricula 'Theodora' which won a plant merit in the Courson Show in 2013.

We have a steady interest in Asiatic primulas and are gradually trying to increase the range of species we grow. We are always sowing different things to see what grows well - with over 430 species of *Primula* to chose from there are still plenty more. Although they are not the mainstay of our collection, we always have a few of the rarer, often more difficult to grow, species such as *P. apoclita* and *P. concholoba* (fig. 16) in waiting for the real keenies.

Double forms of *P. sieboldii* are some of the most exciting plants we have recently introduced from Japan. *P. sieboldii* 'Flamenco' (fig. 17) won a prize at the prestigious Belgium Beervelde Show this spring, and we have a few more cultivars ready in the wings to be introduced this autumn including 'Shibori Gasane' (fig. 18). The Japanese double cultivars seem to be quite vigorous plants that develop well, though we have found that not all the flowers on one plant are always consistently double. We have, of course, been experimenting ourselves, and hope to be able to introduce some of our own doubles in the near future.



Fig. 13 Double primrose 'Snowgoose'.



Fig. 14 Double primrose 'Purple Storm'.



Fig. 15 *Primula auricula* 'Trafalgar Square'. A Fancy auricula.



Fig. 16 *P. concholoba*. Species from the Himalayas. It needs a moist but well-drained soil.



A special prize was awarded for our auricula collection at Beervelde Garden Days, Belgium in May 2013.



Fig. 17 *P. sieboldii* 'Flamenco', a double form introduced in 2015 from Japan.



Fig. 18 *P. sieboldii* 'Shibori Gasane'. Double form – a new Japanese introduction autumn 2016.

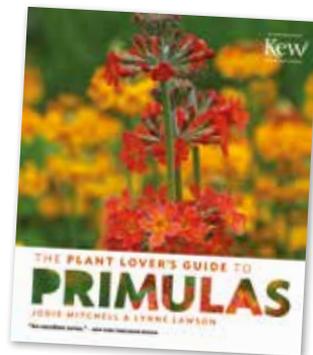
Spreading the word

As if this weren't enough, we are also very much involved in informing people about primroses. We often welcome volunteers and trainees here in Brittany and attend conferences in France and the UK, and we've been invited to the American Primrose Society's conference in Boston next spring. We have a very active Facebook page and will be starting a blog on our website shortly. Our book,

The Plant Lover's Guide to Primulas, came out in April 2016. So if you are interested in finding out more about the nursery and which plants we recommend for your garden, these are good places to start.

We like to think that our predecessors would be delighted that their work continues today. In fact, the nursery is expanding (as I write a new tunnel is going up), and we hope this rather crazy notion of producing

beautiful primulas will continue for the next 80 years. 🌸



Jodie Mitchell helps run the Barnhaven Primroses nursery in France with her husband Rob and parents David and Lynne Lawson. She started pollinating primroses when she was 11, when they first met Angela Bradford who lived in the same village, and often helped out at weekends and in the school holidays. After some years of studying abroad, travelling and teaching, Jodie and Rob decided to give some much needed help in the nursery, and they aim to take over the nursery when David and Lynne retire.