

CONFESSIONS OF A PLANTSWOMAN

Ann Cann

I have had a garden of my own since I was six years old, but it was when I was in my late forties that I became addicted to propagating, selling the plants I grew to colleagues at the Careers Office where I was working. By this time my son, David, and I had a large greenhouse in our walled garden at Morchard Road (near Crediton, Devon) and he had spent a year at Dartington studying horticulture. This is when we began to buy more unusual plants.

From Dartington, in 1985 David went to Cannington Horticultural College, Somerset, and we were able to buy and obtain cuttings from plants not available at garden centres. All the time we were propagating, and were now members of Plant Heritage. We started hiring a table at Plant Heritage Plant Sales in Bicton, Tiverton and South Molton. Sadly there are no longer P.H. sales at Bicton or Tiverton, but we still sold at Tavistock and Totnes until quite recently. We have finally given up selling at Plant Heritage sales now, after 25 years.

David spent a couple of years at Edinburgh Botanic Garden in the late 1990s, helping to edit the final volume of *The European Garden Flora*. During this time, he was asked if he would like to go on a trip with alpine plant expert Dr Chris Grey-Wilson and a party of seven to Georgia, in the former USSR. During the three week trip, he packed his knapsack with plants; I believe every plant survived the journey. The plants obtained from all these places meant we could propagate unusual and rare plants to our hearts' delight. Many of the original plants from that trip are still in my garden, including *Jasminum fruticans*, *Valeriana tiliifolia* and *Vincetoxicum funebre*.

My garden shed became my potting shed. I fixed up a workbench, had lighting installed, and a socket for a heater and radio, then filled the shed with peat-free compost, grit, horticultural sand, rough-cast chippings, pots, pencils, labels and tools. I use various methods of propagation: I sow seeds and split plants, and I take cuttings, putting some straight into the ground and covering them with a cloche, but also growing many in water on the window sill. On a nice day, when the door is open, I am joined by Mrs Cat or Kitten, the cats we brought back from Thailand. For five years, my partner Colin and I spent our winters in Thailand, where Mrs Cat, a stray, adopted us, giving birth to Kitten on our tiny patio, which was festooned with orchids from the local market.

Until twelve years ago I had a 6' x 8' greenhouse, but I realised that I no longer needed it to propagate of the kind of plants I grow, so I turned the area into a covered place to sit and admire the garden (how often does that happen?) with a glass of wine. Now I have three small plastic greenhouses, sited in shadier areas, as does David. None of them have any heating so all plants take their chance in our wonderful English weather. The plants I sell allow me to buy more unusual plants and propagate from them. At the moment I am trying to increase my collection of *Pulsatilla*, which numbers 27 species and varieties. It is said the plants can't be moved or split, but I do both successfully.

David lives in a first floor flat in a block of eight, and his garden is *very* small but it is packed with plants - a quart into a pint pot. He pots up in his kitchen! Outside, as well as the garden, he has his plastic greenhouses and wooden shelving in the flats' washing-line area. Water is collected in buckets when it rains, but any other water has to be taken down a flight of stairs in a watering can. Oh, yes, and he has a tiny shed crammed with pots and tools, plus an allotment for vegetables and cut flowers. He currently holds the Plant Heritage National Collection of *Ruscus*, which we have split between my garden, his garden and the allotment!

I regularly tell myself to cut back on the propagation, but then I see a plant that needs digging up and splitting, or a bit falls off a shrub so I stick it in the ground, or I am given seeds. I have opened my very small garden for group visits and to show individual people around. It may be small, but one lady spent two hours looking around, had lunch with us, and then went on to pore over the front garden. In 2008, I joined the Hardy Plant Society, and that is where I met Colin. By coincidence, we discovered he had bought plants from me twelve years earlier at a plant sale in Bicton: *Sorbus devoniensis*, which David was researching and growing, and *Astrantia major* 'Ann Cann'.

I will finish by saying: My name's Ann and I'm addicted to...propagating!

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