

## COLLECTING GERANIUM NODOSUM

*Joan Taylor*

Many of the plants I tried to grow in my early days of gardening here on the edge of the New Forest in Hampshire failed to thrive, but I quickly learnt what Margery Fish knew: "If in doubt, plant a geranium". Experience showed me that this versatile range of plants were able to survive and do well wherever they were planted. I had hoped to develop a cottage garden with fruit trees, rose bushes and perennials, but I quickly found that deer loved the garden as much as I did. Having given up on the fruit and roses, I only grew those plants that survived the unwelcome visitors' onslaught.

Meanwhile, I had begun to buy hardy geraniums, including *Geranium nodosum*, which I found to have a long flowering season and excellent shade tolerance, which is useful when the garden is surrounded by woodland. Whilst not spectacular when compared with some of the larger flowered cultivars, it certainly made an impact, and it was remarkably resilient to damage from footballs and small feet (my children quickly learnt to respect the borders, but most of their friends didn't).

For several years the gardens developed slowly, and I also started propagating plants. In time, this perpetual propagation needed a bigger outlet and, having met two like-minded friends, we decided to start a plant nursery. Thus Birchwood Plants was born; a small nursery specialising in growing desirable plants not readily available elsewhere. This included propagating plants from Mottisfont Rose Garden, which initially became our retail outlet.



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*Geranium nodosum*



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*G. nodosum* 'Silverwood'

While staying with friends in Herefordshire, I saw a very light leaf *nodosum* in their garden, amongst the more usual coloured ones. I was given it to take home and grow on. Around this time, my husband was diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease (MND), so my work with Birch-wood Plants and the garden was reduced, as our lives changed.

When I returned to nursery life I noticed the small geranium had developed into an attractive low growing plant with lovely white flowers. Having checked with National Collection (NC) Holders that there were no white *nodosums* in cultivation, I registered it as 'Silverwood' and introduced it in 2003. The money I received from its sales went to the MND Association, which gave us amazing support during my husband's illness. Sales of these plants have raised over £3,000 to date.

While visiting Penelope Hellyer's nursery at Orchards in Sussex, I saw yet another stunning *nodosum* growing in the gravel in her car park. I went home with the plant that day; Penelope said it was a seedling from *G. nodosum* 'Whiteleaf', which had since died. Interestingly, an almost identical plant appeared sometime later, named 'Blueberry Ice', by Jenny Spiller from Elworthy Plants, who had been given it from a mutual contact of Penelope - so it must have been a sibling of my plant from the car park, which still remains in my collection as 'Whiteleaf Seedling'.

Having grown several types of *G. nodosum*, which are native to much of Central Europe, I realised what an interesting and virtually unknown group of plants I had collected. They will perform well in any situation, from sandy soil to clay, shade to full sun (apart from whites, which burn in strong sun), damp or dry soil, and they flower for most of the summer. I decided that they needed to be better known and more widely grown.



*G. nodosum* 'Blueberry Ice'

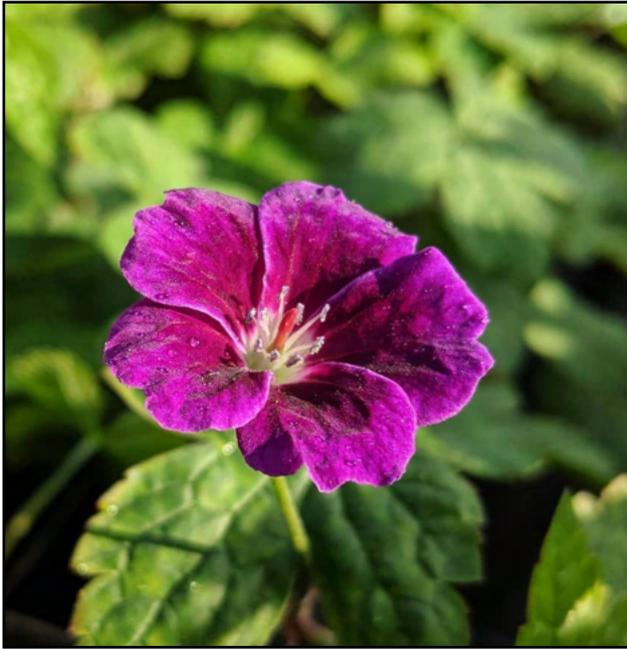
It seemed the only way to increase awareness of this geranium was to become a National Collection (NC) Holder, a path I decided to explore. I obtained the few plants that I still lacked via the RHS Plant Finder and, after growing them on for a few years, spoke to the Plant Heritage (PH) Area Coordinator to check out the further steps I needed to take to become an NC Holder. At that time the minimum requirement was three plants of each cultivar of 75% of the plants available. After filling in various forms to detail the names and provenance of my plants and my reasons for wanting to become an NC holder, I applied to Plant Heritage and my *G. nodosum* collection was awarded provisional status in 2012. I have to keep accurate records and provide an update of losses, acquisitions, open days, etc, which I send annually to Plant Heritage.

I now have 25 different varieties of *G. nodosum*, which are displayed in both north and south facing borders around the garden. I also have a designated area where I allow interesting seedlings to develop. *G. nodosum* is notorious for self-seeding, which is not a problem if the garden is regularly maintained. Small plants can be removed in the spring but, if missed at that stage, can be easily separated later from the stock plants as they will not be attached to the main root system. As mentioned earlier, *G. nodosum* will grow in almost any situation, but they do appreciate the improvement of dry sandy soil by the incorporation of humus-rich material before planting and, ideally, an annual mulch to get the best of foliage and flowers.

I have found the height varies from 30cm ('Silverwood') to 70cms ('Wreighburn House White'). In very hot dry summers they can look jaded, but if you cut back the old foliage and give them a good watering, they will quickly regrow fresh leaves and provide a few flowers for the rest of the season. Most need no support, and show little sign of disease.

*Nodosum* colours vary from white through lilac to mauve pink, to darker velvety shades. Several, such as 'Blueberry Ice', 'Clos du Coudray', 'Julie's Velvet' and 'Whiteleaf' have a light edging around the petals. Those with darker flowers include 'Tony's Talisman', which was a new colour break introduced by Robin Moss from a find in Judith Bradshaw's garden at Catforth, and named after her husband. Although it has a good colour and lovely petal shape, it has been slow to bulk up here in my soil.

An even more stunning plant is 'Fielding's Folly', a fairly new introduction. I discovered it before it had been named, when visiting Mead Nursery near Westbury in Wiltshire (sadly closed in August 2019). We used it at Chelsea on the Delphinium Society stand in 2018, and it sparked considerable interest with its dark velvety flowers and cream stamens. Cultivars such as 'Hexham



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*G. nodosum* 'Fieldings Folly'

being raised by the late Lionel Bacon, past president of the Alpine Garden Society; it was apparently named after his garden.

Whatever the details behind 'Whiteleaf' and its introduction, the plant that I initially bought under that name did not fulfil any of these descriptions. I then found an impressively coloured 'Whiteleaf' at Mead Nursery. Was this the original plant? Alas, a closer look revealed that it, too, did not fulfil either of the descriptions above. But it was beautiful nonetheless. If anyone can clarify this situation, please let me know.

*G. nodosum* is at last becoming a little more widely known. For the last few years the Plant Heritage stand at the Hampton Court RHS Flower Show has displayed several cultivars. 'Silverwood' is growing in the borders at both Mottisfont Rose Garden and Hidcote Gardens. It was also quite widely used at the Chelsea Flower Show in 2018, both in RHS displays and in the Best Garden In Show (albeit mislabelled in the latter).

Following several hot dry summers, I became concerned about the colour stability of *nodosum* flowers: some plants produced blooms that bore no resemblance to their true form, to the extent that it was impossible to identify them; and some produced several differently coloured flowers at the same time. The Plant Heritage Area Coordinator and I agreed we would try to find volunteers to grow some of these plants in areas with different soil conditions and rainfall, to see if they influence this apparent instability. If you would be interested in helping with this experiment, please get in touch at [joanvtaylor@hotmail.com](mailto:joanvtaylor@hotmail.com).

'Lace' and 'Hexham Feathers' have interesting petal shapes, but I find these are only really distinctive in the first flush and that they generally revert to more normal petals on subsequent flowers. Others, like 'Dark Heart', 'Hexham Freckles' and 'Hexham Face Paint' have colourful markings. Certain other cultivars are so nondescript, I have to question why they were ever given a cultivar name.

An interesting exercise has been to try and track down the original 'Whiteleaf', the only cultivar to be mentioned in the Peter F. Yeo book, *Hardy Geraniums* (2001): "'Whiteleaf' has extremely dark petals...marked with nearly black feathered veins."

Bill Baker refers to having found a form of *nodosum* with a dark centre and white edges to its pink petals in Trevor Bath and Joy Jones's book *Hardy Geraniums* (1994). However, the Geranium Register refers to 'Whiteleaf' as



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*G. nodosum* 'Hexham Freckles'