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Fig. 1 *Heuchera* 'Snowflakes'

Gardeners in the UK are fortunate in being able to access a great range of habitats and micro-climates enabling them to grow a wide range of plants, and with so much choice it is inevitable that some garden plants risk being lost to cultivation as fashions change and new cultivars vie for our attention.

Trends in gardening change over time, as does the popularity of the plants we grow, and because many herbaceous perennials tend to have a shorter lifespan than trees and shrubs, they can be vulnerable if not propagated and made available to buy from nurseries and garden centres.

Plant breeders constantly strive to improve the characteristics and widen the choice of plants we grow in our gardens, introducing a range of different forms and colours each year. Many will not stand the test of time,

perhaps because they're less able to withstand extremes of temperature or rainfall, they're more susceptible to pests and diseases or they prove to be just a passing fashion. Older cultivars may be considered better plants, but in some cases they can no longer be found and their unique genetic material may therefore also be lost. Older plants are part of our social and gardening history, preserving associations with people and places; growing such plants enriches our gardens and forms an important part of our gardening heritage.

The Hardy Plant Society's Conservation Scheme seeks to identify plants which deserve to be more widely known. Rather than attempting to conserve all cultivated plants, we make choices based on members' recommendations, then grow those plants in different

## The good, the bad and the unknown – tales from the HPS Conservation Scheme

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areas across the country, propagate them for exchange and sale, and share what we learn about their history and cultivation through information on the HPS website. These activities are open to all members and are one of our charitable aims.

One of the most important considerations when taking a new plant into the Scheme is



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Fig. 2 *Hemerocallis* 'Apple Court Damson'



Fig. 3 *Erysimum* 'Ruston Royal'

provenance – but how do we ensure that we have the correct plant and the correct name. Lost labels, misspelt names and rogue seedlings can and often do cause problems, so it can require detailed research to try and establish the truth. Some plants have better documentation, especially where the name and accurate description are recorded by a recognised registration authority, although this only applies to a minority.

### The good

Conservation was one of the main reasons for the formation of the HPS, when nurserymen were concerned at the dramatic reduction in the number of cultivars available to gardeners after World War II, the result of the loss of stock when nurseries' fields were turned over to food production and the loss of agricultural land for replacement housing developments.

One of the Society's founders was Alan Bloom, a remarkable plantsman and plant breeder responsible for literally hundreds of new plant introductions. One of the first genera he worked with was *Heuchera*, in those days popular with the cut-flower trade and grown for flowers rather than foliage. *Heuchera* 'Snowflakes' (fig. 1) was one of his early introductions in 1938. It has white flowers rather than the usual coral red, and forms an attractive mound of light green, mottled foliage which persists well through the winter. Last year, *Heuchera* 'Snowflakes' plants from the Conservation Scheme were given to Bressingham to be planted back into the Dell Garden.

Some plants will struggle to become commercially successful, such as *Hemerocallis* 'Apple Court Damson' (fig. 2) which although not difficult to



Fig. 4 *Lychnis x walkeri* 'Abbotswood Rose'

grow is slow to bulk up. Its flowers are a wonderful colour, reminiscent of the dusky fruit of the many damson trees at Apple Court Nursery in Hampshire after which it was named by then owner Diana Grenfell, who recognised its merit in a batch of seedlings grown from seed imported from America.

It takes a keen eye to appreciate a self-sown seedling as something special; *Erysimum* 'Ruston Royal' (fig. 3) was discovered in the garden of East Ruston Old Vicarage in Norfolk. It is thought to be a cross between *E.* 'Bowles's Mauve' and a Canary Island species from which it gets the lighter green, heavily serrated leaves and large stature. It flowers continuously nearly all year, but like all *erysimums* it's



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Fig. 5 An Iris Californian Hybrid, but **not** *Iris* 'Banbury Gem'

a short-lived perennial and needs to be propagated from cuttings to survive.

*Lychnis x walkeri* 'Abbotswood Rose' (fig. 4) is named after Abbotswood Garden in the Cotswolds, owned by plantsman Mark Fenwick from 1901 until his death in 1945. The classic early 20th century garden is important because Fenwick engaged architect Edwin Lutyens to remodel the house and garden and numbered a young Russell Page among his team of gardeners; Fenwick's planting is thought to have influenced Lawrence Johnston in his planting at Hidcote. It is presumed that this *lychnis* was found as a chance hybrid in the garden. It is known to be hardy and more compact than *L. coronaria* and was awarded an AGM in 1993.

### The bad

Iris are relatively easy to verify by checking the



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Fig. 6 A *Pulmonaria* hybrid, but **not** *Pulmonaria* 'Netta Statham'

American Iris Society's database. *Iris* 'Banbury Gem', a Californian Hybrid bred by Marjorie Brummitt in 1972, was added to the Conservation Scheme prior to 2005 although little information about the provenance of that original plant was recorded. As recent photographs (fig. 5) do not match the description on the Iris database, it has now been excluded from the Scheme.

*Pulmonaria* 'Netta Statham' was described by Netta herself as 'a lovely one from Margery Fish, with almost entirely silver leaves with deep-blue flowers'. But she went on to say that she gave away the seedlings with the best markings so the plant we had was unlikely to have been the true *P. 'Netta Statham'* and, although it had good blue flowers, the leaves were green, irregularly spotted silver (fig. 6). It too has been excluded.

Both Californian Hybrid irises and pulmonarias seed themselves around quite readily, which highlights the need to propagate all the plants on the Conservation Scheme by vegetative methods, either by division or cuttings. While species will breed true from seed, cultivars may vary widely, demonstrating characteristics from both parents.

### The unknown

The origins of some cultivars may remain a mystery, the documented story beginning only after they've been recognised as good garden plants. *Chrysanthemum* 'Dulwich Pink' (fig. 7) was found growing in Dulwich Park, London. The bright-pink single flowers with a yellow eye are a vibrant addition to the autumn garden, proving quite weather resistant. The plant is completely hardy, having proved itself (gaining an AGM) in the RHS Trial



Fig. 7 *Chrysanthemum* 'Dulwich Pink'



Fig. 8 *Chrysanthemum* 'Buxton Ruby'

of Hardy Chrysanthemums 2010–2012 at Wisley, a period that saw record low winter temperatures to  $-17^{\circ}\text{C}$ . It is perhaps not such a surprise that it was found in Dulwich as local sources record that by the Edwardian period the cultivation

of chrysanthemums had become very popular locally and the Dulwich Chrysanthemum Society was formed in 1916.

#### And the future?

It would be lovely to imagine some of these plants gaining popularity

and becoming commercially available to all gardeners, but sadly that is unlikely in the fast-moving, competitive horticultural market. We continue to look to smaller nurseries to test their potential, but a recent look at some of the plants that have been considered to have a safe future has shown that this is not always the case.

*Chrysanthemum* 'Buxton Ruby' (fig. 8) was found as an unnamed plant at Woottens of Wenhaston by an HPS member who decided to name it after the Norfolk village where she lives. It was dropped from the Conservation Scheme in 2011 when at least 10 nurseries were offering it for sale, but with only two now offering plants the future looks far from safe and it may need to be brought back to the Scheme. It may not be commercially successful because it flowers late in November when few customers are looking for new plants and gardens open to the public have closed.

The Society's Conservation Scheme encourages all members to participate in growing, observing and propagating plants such as these to ensure that they gain the recognition they deserve and continue to have a place in our gardens. 🌼

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