



©Helen Mount

## Present-day hardy planters of note – Ken Hall’s Nerines

### Helen Mount

Fig. 1 *Nerine sarniensis* in Ken’s glasshouse

The four ‘founding fathers’: Alan Bloom, Arthur Hellyer, John Sambrook and Will Ingwersen, who started the HPS in 1957, together with the indomitable woman Rose Pole, who refused to let the organisation disappear soon after its establishment, have all had well-deserved recognition for making this great society.

Sadly they are no longer with us, and that sparked a thought about the many plantspeople and nursery owners alive today, who continue that tradition of growing and developing the great variety of garden-worthy perennials that we can all enjoy in the years to come.

My search for worthy contributors to present-day horticulture could not have begun more easily, as I live on the Isle of Wight. I was aware that there had recently been an RHS trial of hardy

nerines, and so it would be entirely fitting to choose a fellow islander to write about first: Ken Hall, who has a Plant Heritage National Collection® of Nerine.

Ken has spent his life in horticulture. As a young man in the late 1940s he worked on the Lowther Estate in Westmorland (now Cumbria). After attending Newton Rigg College in Penrith and achieving a National Diploma in Horticulture, he eventually went on to accept a position as instructor at Oaklands College in St Albans. There he met his (late) wife Margaret, who also came from a horticultural family.

The couple eventually moved to the Isle of Wight, where Ken took up the post of manager for Arthur Stevens Ltd, growers of roses and carnations. He remained there until 1970,

when the opportunity arose to purchase an 11-acre field near Newchurch, on the Island. Margaret and Ken established Springbank Nursery at Newchurch, initially growing food crops, but in the 1980s they turned to growing ornamental garden plants in the face of fierce competition from the large supermarket chains, which forced many small producers like them out of the market.

Ken’s first encounter with the less-hardy nerine *N. sarniensis* happened by chance on a visit to Borde Hill Gardens in West Sussex, in 1983. He had been invited by the late Robert Stephenson Clarke to look at his tender rhododendrons in the glasshouses there, and his curiosity led him to ask about the pots of dormant bulbs also present.

He was given a gift of *Nerine* 'Meadowbankii' – an old *N. sarniensis* cultivar with brilliant vermilion flowers – and when it did flower he was well and truly smitten.

Ken went on to buy part of the Borde Hill collection containing *N. sarniensis*, its cultivars and hybrids,

plus other nerine species. This was followed by the acquisition of another nerine collection from local man Harry Dalton, who had been on many trips to South Africa, collecting wild forms of nerines. Harry, who had also developed new hybrids and cultivars from his own

breeding programme, was meticulous in documenting pollination information, thus enabling correct identification by others.

Word of Ken's activities was out and another local nerine enthusiast, retired scientist Chris Edwards, contacted him and they exchanged information about their plants. Along with Ken's family, Chris has provided much help with his collection over the years. Through the 1980s and 1990s the collection grew even bigger, and Ken started to make his own selections of *N. sarniensis*. His stock currently stands at about 3,600: a breath-taking sight in the glasshouse in mid-October (fig. 1).

The range of available colours in *N. sarniensis* far exceeds that of *N. bowdenii*, with shades of orange, red, peach, and bi-colours with smoky purples as well as whites through to pinks; for example *N. sarniensis* 'Hotspur', *N. s.* 'King Leopold', and *N. s.* 'Marie Louise' (figs 2-4). However, what the *N. bowdenii* lack in colour diversity they make up for in hardiness, as *N. sarniensis* will not tolerate freezing or prolonged low temperatures, and must be grown under glass – with heating – where there is any risk of frost.

With the help of Margaret, two of their children Elizabeth and William, plus Chris Edwards, Ken exhibited



Fig. 2 *N. s.* 'Hotspur'



Fig. 3 *N. s.* 'King Leopold'

some of his nerines at the RHS Westminster Autumn shows. They achieved a silver-gilt medal on their first attempt in 1993, then went on to win gold medals and other awards in subsequent years (fig. 5). They also won two gold medals at the Malvern Autumn Shows, in 1997 and 1998. Eventually though, running a successful, busy plant nursery together with the effects of advancing years, made the trips to London too difficult, and they ceased exhibiting.

Ken's interest in *Nerine bowdenii* increased when he took the opportunity to purchase half of the collection of Cuthbert (Tony) Norris after the latter's death in 2005. Norris had visited South Africa many times and collected nerines, but by the time the collection was dispersed it was in a sorry state – with numerous lost and faded labels – making precise identification of many of them impossible. This is another chapter in Ken's efforts to rescue all or part of several collections, helping to ensure their survival.

One nerine that survived the transition from the latter collection is *N. bowdenii* 'Manina', which Norris had collected in an area he described as Manina



Fig. 4 *N. s.* 'Marie Louise'



Fig. 5 A few of Ken's award-winning *Nerine sarniensis*

Forest, close to Ngcobo in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. This plant makes large bulbs and has strong, very pale pink flowers with a paler-pink midstripe, from bright green pedicels, flowering October to November and reaching up to 70cm. It is easy to grow, and hardy (fig. 6).

*Nerine bowdenii* 'Regina', another from the Norris collection, was the only other hardy nerine that could be positively identified. Thought by some to be a hybrid, *N. b.* 'Regina' is a robust grower with strong, deep-pink flowers; broad upright, deep-green leaves; and a long flowering season (fig. 7).



Fig. 6 *N. bowdenii* 'Manina'



Fig. 7 *N. b.* 'Regina'



Fig. 8 *N. bowdenii* trial beds at Newchurch

Ken planted out the hardy *N. bowdenii* plants from the Norris collection in large borders in the open at Springbank, so that a better assessment of their performance could be made (fig. 8). Further selections and hybridisation continued, and a few of the best were entered into the recent RHS Trials, which were run jointly with the Nerine and Amaryllid Society (NAAS).

The main objectives of these trials were to assess *Nerine bowdenii* and its cultivars and hybrids, for hardiness in UK gardens (H4 and H5); to clarify the nomenclature; and to award AGMs to the best plants. The trials were conducted on two sites – one in Shropshire at the garden of the late Margaret Owen (she died during the time of these trials) – and the other in Hampshire at the home of the extensive collection held by Victoria Wakefield. Three to five bulbs of each variety were planted between 2012 and 2013, and judging began in 2014, continuing periodically until the trial ended in 2018.

Ken entered several of his plants into the trials, and three were awarded AGMs: *Nerine bowdenii* 'Regina', *N. b.* 'Diamond' (fig. 9 – subject to availability) and *N. b.* 'Ellex' (fig. 10 – subject to availability). *N. b.* 'Diamond' was described by the judges as having '*beautiful colour and a long flowering season*'

and ‘... a very stately appearance with a strong, bold habit’. The judges felt that this could be an *N. b.* ‘Manina’ hybrid. *N. b.* ‘Ellex’ was described as ‘a really beautiful strong, bold plant which bulks up fast. Lovely green pedicel and long flowering season’. All three were given unanimous approval by the judges.

Among other nerines that received AGMs subject to availability were *N.* ‘Top Hat’ and *N.* ‘Margaret Owen’, both of which came originally from Ken’s Norris collection. Margaret Owen had visited Springbank on numerous occasions in the past, and always went away with several generous gifts of hardy nerine forms she had admired. Some of these she entered into the trials, with the recognition that they had originally come from Ken.

A total of 17 entries to the trials were awarded AGMs. Further information may be obtained from the final report, details of which can be found at the end of this article.

Springbank Nursery and Garden Centre closed its doors in 2013 when Ken reached his 80th birthday, but he shows no sign of slowing down in his enthusiasm for plants (not just nerines) and people (fig. 11). He continues to host the annual visit of the NAAS to his National Collection® every October, as well as welcoming visitors



Fig. 9 *N. b.* ‘Diamond’



Fig. 10 *N. b.* ‘Ellex’

from near and far, by appointment. In addition, he supports the annual displays of nerines and amaryllids on the NAAS stand at the Malvern Autumn Shows, by providing plant material when needed.

As well as caring for his existing collections, Ken’s current focus is on increasing stocks of *N. bowdenii*

‘Diamond’ and *N. b.* ‘Ellex’, with the help of retired professional propagator Phil Kaye, who also lives locally. It will take a few years to achieve flowering-sized bulbs, but will be well worth the wait as it will allow a much wider distribution of these fine plants, and help them properly achieve that much-deserved AGM.



Fig. 11 Ken Hall among his *Nerine sarniensis*

It is hoped that this article will whet a few members' appetites to try growing nerines, especially the *N. bowdenii* forms, which have proved hardier in northern

parts of the UK than many previously believed. Even in colder northern gardens, suitable micro-climates can often be found. Several of the plants which achieved AGMs

are readily available from various bulb suppliers.

Further information about Newchurch Nerines can be obtained by contacting [newchurchnerines@gmail.com](mailto:newchurchnerines@gmail.com) 

**Helen Mount** lives and gardens on the Isle of Wight, but sadly does not enjoy the same free-draining soil that Ken does.

### Notes and References

1. RHS Trial of Hardy Nerines: Final Report – [www.rhs.org.uk/trials](http://www.rhs.org.uk/trials)
2. Nerine and Amaryllid Society – [www.nerineandamaryllidsociety.co.uk](http://www.nerineandamaryllidsociety.co.uk)
3. RHS hardiness ratings:
  - H4:** -10C to -5C. Hardy throughout most of the UK apart from inland valleys and central/northerly locations. Should survive an average winter but may suffer foliage damage in cold gardens.
  - H5:** -15C to -10C. Hardy throughout most of the UK and will survive a cold winter but may not do so in exposed sites and central/northerly locations.