



THE ALPINE GARDEN SOCIETY
ULSTER GROUP

Newsletter No.2

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Newsletter No 2 August 2003

Editorial

Our first Newsletter last year proved popular so once again we have put pen to paper to both inform and entertain. There will be a certain amount of repetition as both old and new members are given information on the Ulster Group meetings and the basic running of our group.

However I am delighted that some of our members have contributed articles which I am sure you will all enjoy as much as I have. These were also given so willingly that next year I know I can rely on everyone for further contributions.

A warm welcome to all our new members and I hope we all enjoy a year of interesting meetings, good gardening and great companionship.

Contributions

Snowdrop Spree

Lady Barbara Bates

The day was cold, but it was dry and quite sunny when we set off.

Any idea that “a snowdrop is a snowdrop is a snowdrop” was quickly dispelled when we arrived at Mark’s garden. His front garden is filled with raised beds containing snowdrops of all shapes and sizes and colour variations. I am not an expert, but the conversation waxed long and hard between those in the know. It was interesting and rewarding to see such a display.



A quick cup of coffee in the car, and then we were off to Margaret’s. Now, Margaret’s garden is a joy to visit any day of the year, and this day was no exception.

Snowdrops and crocus in abundance, but lots of other treasures to see. The garden does not stand still, and there had been much alteration since my last visit. But now we encountered hellebores in profusion. Many colours, combinations of colours, mouth-watering shades, and a particularly good yellow in that corner, that had the green-eyed monster telling me I should have brought a trowel and willed everyone to sleep for a few minutes.

Then in for lunch.. Margaret, as usual, had organised a delicious spread of soup and sandwiches. How she stands us all milling about her house I don’t know, but it was a chance to renew acquaintances, discuss plants, and generally to have a good time. It is why I belong to the AGS. The plant stall was, as usual, full of temptations and we left with bulging bags, or even boxes, to stash in the boot of the car.

Our next port of call was Bob Gordon’s garden. Strolling round this garden always has a tranquillising, winding down effect. The hellebores here were stunning, the colours fantastic, whole long beds of them, and many dotted around. I have never got H. totquatus to grow like Bob does. All the hellebores were prolific, in huge clumps and with colours beyond belief. A great sight, and, again, much movement and alteration in evidence, as gardens should have. A garden is never finished.

I had heard descriptions of June Dougherty’s snowdrops and crocus, but nothing, nothing had prepared me for the magnificent display. The sun had come out and opened the crocus, and there were shimmering, sensuous and swirling rivers of flowers snaking into the distance in every direction. There were also some choice hellebores and other interesting features in the garden, but on this day snowdrop and crocus were King and Queen.

The day ended with afternoon tea in June’s elegant home, with herself wielding the teapot graciously. The home-made goodies were a bonus.

Drunk with flowers, we set off home, having had an interesting and enjoyable day.

Our thanks to our hosts for their hospitality and for not a weed being in sight; and the organisers of such an event deserve great credit. This early spring event gets better and better. Thank you.

(Mental note to myself – “must do better”. I have started to plant an empty bank with snowdrops.)

Footnote:- The wonderful plant stall, organised by Mr. Jim Price, helped by Michael Geraghy, raised £760. for the Group.

Cornish Cream

Group Visit to Cornwall

Harold McBride

Two interesting factors came to light during our trip, firstly Cornwall is one of the highest rainfall areas in these Islands and secondly, one of the poorest areas in Europe due to the decline of its traditional industries, tin mining and china clay production.

Garden tourism is now very important to the area, with the Eden Project having more visitors than any other tourist attraction in G.B. It just goes to show what plenty of publicity and good marketing can do!

Other large gardens in the area which are open to the public such as “The Lost Gardens of Heligan” no doubt benefit from the large number of “gardening tourists” drawn in by the Project.

I think we all found the Eden Project very interesting and well managed, but it was the private gardens such as Trebah – a 26 acre Cornish ravine garden with excellent vistas through the well grown shrubs and trees, as you walked down the ravine to reach the private beach, which we really enjoyed.

Easily my favourite garden was Pine Lodge Gardens and Nursery near St Austell, featuring over 6000 rare and unusual plants, set in delightful park land, - also a lake complete with black swans, an arboretum, a pinetum, a Japanese garden, and a “slave” Garden! The water garden with its stone bridges and cascades was quite superb.

Pine Lodge like all the gardens we visited, had excellent tea rooms which served Cornish cream teas of a very high standard.

Our thanks to Margaret for all her hard work in once again arranging a very happy and enjoyable gardening trip.



“A garden is a thing of beauty and a job for ever.”

Profile – Mrs Nan Toner

by Pat Crossley

Our President, Mrs. Nan Toner, has been in poor health in recent years and this is a short profile by Pat Crossley for new members who may not have known her and also for older members to remember Nan with affection, not forgetting her ambitions for the Ulster Group of the A.G.S.



For some forty years Mrs Nan Toner has been a totally loyal and dedicated member of the A.G.S. and its Ulster Group. She has always loved flowers and indeed in her early years was a most excellent florist in a city centre flower shop in Belfast. Nan joined the A.G.S. at the invitation of the late Miss Norah Lonsdale (Hon Secretary of the Ulster Group), who had noticed Nan planting in her new garden at Knightsbridge Park. In those days, prospective members were “invited” to join the Society ! Throughout all Nan’s years with the Group, she continued to encourage new members, and still remains the same sweet gracious little person that I’ve known for sixty years.

In 1973 Nan was appointed Hon. Show Secretary, a post she held with distinction and enthusiasm for the next 13 years. Nan was a driving force behind the plant stall and its helpers where much needed income was generated.

During Nan’s leadership the Artistic Section was commenced – Ulster and London became the only two shows to have such a privilege. During the 60’s and 70’s many important ladies, complete with hats, opened the show – to name but a few, Lady Wakehurst and Lady Grey – wives of Governors of Northern Ireland.

The Dublin Show commenced in 1986 during Nan’s term of office, and she gave Southern members much help and encouragement to establish their now very successful show. In 1980 the Mini Show - now known as the Members Show, was reinstated to encourage new members and to give confidence to enter the main

show. The City of Belfast Show was another of Nan's 'babies', but had to be discontinued due to lack of support from members to exhibit.

Nan was Chairman of the Ulster Group in 1989 – the Group's Golden Jubilee year, when a special dinner was held at Belfast Castle and she was so delighted to accompany Harold McBride on their trip to New Zealand for Alpines '96, when Harold was one of the guest speakers, even taking a helicopter flight to see alpines.

The honour of being invited to be President of the Ulster Group was much appreciated by Nan – an office she holds until this day – she was so delighted to follow in the footsteps of her two great friends and predecessors – namely the late Dr Molly Sanderson and the late Mrs Phebe Anderson.

May she continue to enjoy the flowers and long may her eyes sparkle as she recalls alpine friends of yesteryears and today.

Narcissus rupicola ssp watieri

George Gordon

The Moslem view of paradise, like the Christian Garden of Eden, encompasses flowers and running water. If so my personal view of heaven would be to sit in the Atlas Mountains in North Africa with the tiny white daffodils of *Narcissus rupicola ssp watieri* at my feet. A bottle of wine would be desirable, but optional.

Of all the species in the rather confused genus *Narcissus*, this is the one that elicits the most response from admiring eyes. The icy white flowers have a short corona, and the uniformity of height at flowering time makes it a very good show plant.



Photo : George Gordon

Technically it is also one of the easier *Narcissus* to identify. John Blanchard in "*Narcissus A Guide to Wild Daffodils*" places it firmly in the Section *Apodanthes* on the basis of the corona being markedly shorter than the petals, and the leaves

being glaucous and channeled/keeled. From all other congeners in this section it is also clearly differentiated by the lack of a pedicel and the anthers all being included in the tube. I first discovered the nominate *rupicola*, which comes from Spain and Portugal, in the early 1990s, and it is an equally desirably daffodil. It did well for Pat and myself at Shows, when we were on the C and B benches, and indeed featured in the recent Spring Show at Greenmount when Pat Duffy had a pot full on the Open Bench. So it was logical that I would acquire any other *rupicolas* I could from the seed exchanges. In 1994 I got seed of *watieri* from the Scottish Rock Garden Club. It was sown on 17th January, and germinated by 2nd May. I have found all *Narcissus* seed easy, as they are large and not likely to be infertile. Most seed exchanges give five seeds of *Narcissus*, and I use a standard mix of John Innes, grit and multipurpose compost in a 9cm square plastic pot (as I will be keeping the seedlings in the same pot for at least two years). I pot up the seedlings after a few years into the same mixture, this time into a clay pot, by carefully tapping out the whole pot even when in active growth.

At this stage I keep the pots plunged in the greenhouse, and they join the regime of an annual potting in late summer and autumn. I find *ssp watieri* to be no harder to keep going than *rupicola*, but slower to flower. The latter can throw up the odd flower in two years, and certainly most will flower in three. It took me five years with *watieri*, and by 2000 I was able to show it. It has been annual ever since. It also bulks up reasonably well, as the pot in our Members Show in 2003 had 28 flowers (that is starting from five seeds in 1994).

There is still an air of mystery about this species, as with all good plants I suspect. One is how it is pollinated. As I said all six anthers are included in the tube of the flower, but the style is set even lower. To cross-pollinate it would be necessary to cut a slit in the tube. So what pollinates it? John Blanchard suggests moths, which might be true in the High Atlas, but is unlikely in my greenhouse in March and April. Yet it readily sets seed for me, as well as for others, as it appears in the three seed exchanges I take part in (Alpine Garden Society, Scottish Rock and North American Rock Garden Society).

Secondly although it grows in the High Atlas in North Africa it is closer morphologically to *rupicola* in Spain and Portugal, than it is to the other yellow *ssp marvieri* which inhabits North Africa (and indeed if *watieri* grew in Spain it would only be regarded as a white form of *rupicola*, rather than a subspecies).

Thirdly I tried twin-scaling a bulb last year, along with some *Galanthus*, for the first time. This entails keeping the small scales in vermiculite for several months in a dark cupboard. To be honest the plastic bag containing *watieri* slipped down the back, and went un-noticed for six months. However when I did discover it three small bulbs had developed, and more astonishingly had started into growth!! Yet this cupboard was only opened very occasionally and for very brief periods, but enough light had been admitted for chlorophyll to develop.

I have heard it said that *watieri* is hard to grow. That is not my experience. It is slower yes, but once you have it, is a question of patience. Indeed I have lost *rupicola* much more quickly. I suspect too that if you buy a single bulb somewhere, it will take a long time to bulk up and flower freely. Bulbs like to be together, and I have had similar experiences with single bulbs of *Galanthus* "Cambridge", which took a long time to fill a pot, but now can be readily divided.

So get your skates on, and watch out for it in seed exchanges. Buy a good bottle of wine and lay it down for the future. The rest is a little work and lot of patience, but the rewards will be yours.

Czech Home for Maisie's Bulletins

Mrs. Margaret Glynn

Not many members of our Group can claim to have a complete set of AGS Bulletins but Maisie Michael was one. Dedicated and knowledgeable gardener which she was, the set was treasured for necessary and frequent references, because it was her often expressed view that "no matter how much you know about growing alpines, there's more to learn."

Before her death on 14th January 1998 she had indicated to myself, as a committee member, that her complete set was to be given to the Ulster Group provided (whatever the Committee decided should be done) it be kept intact. The value of the set was obtained from AGS Centre but, in spite of repeated attempts to sell the bulletins within the membership, North and South, at a very favourable price, there were no takers.

So the set remained on storage in John McWhirter's house until Spring 2003 when the current committee voted to make a gift to Vojtech Holubec of the Czech Republic, stressing that Maisie's wishes be honoured. It was to be understood that the members of the Rock Garden Club of Prague or other interested parties could make library use of the set but ultimate responsibility for their care remained with Vojtech.

I met this young Czech at Autumn 2002 Scottish Rock Garden Club Discussion Week-end when I had the opportunity to hear him lecture, view his slides and listen over dinner with great admiration and interest while he talked so enthusiastically about alpines.

It was simply a casual remark about economics in his country that precluded many keen gardeners from joining the AGS and therefore not having access to reading material like "your marvellous bulletins" that stuck in my mind. And that remark prompted my request to the current committee to consider gifting the set as described. Air freight was organised, the cost of which was virtually paid for by the proceeds of the raffle of a mini-trough, planted as a demonstration at a "Back to Basics" meeting.

There is no doubt in my mind that Maisie would be thoroughly pleased that her collection had gone to a good home, hopefully to help inspire or educate many new Czech members to grow and appreciate alpines as she herself did.

Vojtech's thank-you letter is addressed to myself as Committee rep. But my thanks go to Maisie – in her day one of the greatest and most generous members of the Ulster Group and faithful friend to many.

Thank-you Maisie, for helping the Ulster Group keep alive the concept that our gardens do not end at one's own garden gate.

Footnote:- A letter of thanks was sent to the Ulster Group from Vojtech Holubec, the bulletins are now in the RGCP library where they can be borrowed by members .

News

New Vice Presidents

We are delighted to welcome two of our most senior and faithful members as Vice-Presidents, Mr. Frank Walsh and Mrs. Eppy Schierbeek.

Holiday

Once again Mrs. Margaret Glynn has had the inspiration of planning a garden trip, this time further afield, to the Czech Republic. All members should have had a circular by now-(if not, contact Margaret). Judging by the success of her previous trips, there will be a big response.

Obituary Lax Smiley

We record with great sadness the death of Lax Smiley, a very faithful member of the Ulster group for many years. Lax was always there when help was needed, setting up at shows, brushing up after meetings, and doing everything with a warm

smile. He will be greatly missed. Our sympathy goes out to Robin and the family circle.

Information

The Ulster Group is affiliated to the Alpine Garden Society, founded in 1929 and grown to become one of the largest specialist garden societies in the world with its aim to promote an interest in alpine plants in cultivation and in their wild habitats.

The parent Society provides both advice, insurance, show help to local groups as well as its excellent bulletins, holidays, seed exchange, conferences etc. and local groups need its overall cover. With the recent changes to the constitution, in future at least 75% of local group members will have to belong to the A.G.S. for the Group to remain under its auspices. However we all need to meet locally and hence the Ulster Group. In our first Newsletter, Mr. John McWhirter gave an interesting account of the history of this group, started in 1938.

Venue

At present meetings are held on Saturdays in the Lecture Theatre, Main Building, Stranmillis University College, Belfast, where there are good parking facilities. The lectures begin at 2.30 p.m. from September until March, exact dates given on the fixtures card.

Organisation

The Ulster Group is run by a small committee composed of a Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Secretary, Programme Secretary, Treasurer, Show Secretary, and five committee members including the past Chairman. The Chairman and the committee members serve for two years, with two members being elected each year, and further members can be co-opted if necessary. All must belong to the A.G.S. The committee meets three times a year and tries to ensure the smooth running of the Group. An effort is made to try to let all our members serve on the committee so that they are familiar with all aspects of our activities and with the revised constitution there is a time limit on all posts.

As well as the committee we need helpers for everything from making tea, selling plants, tidying, opening gardens, etc. so I appeal to everyone to help in any way

you can. And our sincere thanks to all our helpers, without you there would be no group!

Group Finances

The Group finances are in the capable hands of the Hon. Treasurer, Mrs. Margaret Glynn, who with the help of an expert accountant's advice, keeps us in the black! The income comes from subscriptions, plant sales, raffles etc; while expenses include lecture room hire, speakers expenses and fees, capital expenditure etc. The income and expenditure accounts are presented at the AGM.

Group Subscriptions

Local current subscriptions rates are £7.00 single, £9.00 family (a slight increase due to a rise in cost of our venue). **To help our treasurer, please put your subscription into the envelope provided with your name, title, address, postal code, and telephone number and email (if wished), clearly written on the outside.** Give this or post it to Mrs. Margaret Glynn, Hon. Treasurer either at the A.G.M. or before the end of the current year. A limit of one year's grace is given. This subscription is for the local Group only and subscriptions to The Alpine Garden Society must be sent direct.

Visitors are welcome to our lectures for the small fee of £1.00 but feel free to invite anyone who might be interested in joining, especially to the Society Lecture which is open and free to all.

Meetings

Group Meetings Format

For new members meetings can appear very busy and bustling affairs so this is a short section to describe what happens at our average meeting.

While the lecture theatre is being set up from 2.00 p.m. to 2.30.p.m., members can buy plants at the plant stall or books at the book stall or generally chat.

The lecture usually lasts between an hour and an hour and a quarter, illustrated with slides, and usually four lectures in the year are given by invited speakers from outside the Province. There is a short time for questions, new members often asking the best questions. The Chairman then thanks the speaker and brings us back to earth with the Group notices.

We all next have a very welcome cup of tea and biscuits with more time to buy

plants or books and exchange topics.

The following gives a little more general detail on some of our meetings throughout the year and for the exact dates and titles please refer to your fixtures card.

A.G.M. and Plant Sale

The AGM is the work meeting of the year when the Reports and Accounts for the year are presented and the Officers and Committee are elected or re-elected. Any changes or future proposals are also discussed.

After the business is finished there is an extra special plant sale as this is our first meeting after the summer break and a short lecture is also included to add interest to the meeting.

Dr. Molly Sanderson Memorial Lecture.

Dr. Mary Elizabeth (Molly) Sanderson 1913-1995, was President of the Ulster Group A.G.S. from 1985 to 1995. To ensure that the Ulster members would continue to have a high standard of lecturers, she left a bequest to the Group for a lecture in her memory. Although in poor health she was able to attend the first lecture given in 1995 by Helen Dillon. A high standard has been maintained since then and the lecture is always well attended including members of her family. Dr. Sanderson will always be remembered not only for the great legacy of her plants and as a great Irish gardener, but also for her generosity in sharing her plants with everyone.

The Society Lecture

To encourage an interest in alpine and rock plants and also to increase membership, the A.G.S. have recently undertaken to help sponsor each year a lecture which is free and open to anyone to attend. Members are asked to bring all their gardening friends along.

Combined R.H.S./A.G.S. Lecture

Once again we are also having a combined lecture with the Royal Horticultural Society which is free to members of either society, expenses being shared between the two groups.

Back to Basics

This meeting is run by our own members and takes various forms all intended to give knowledge to both beginners and more experienced alpine gardeners. It ranges

from seed sowing, taking cuttings to plant profiles, understanding plant names and any questions.

The Annual Luncheon

The January meeting takes the form of the Annual Luncheon which is held in different hotels in the Province. After lunch everyone is entertained by a speaker and slide show and there is time to relax and chat after Christmas. Tickets for the Luncheon are sold at the November and December meetings. The venue this year is the Leighinmohr House Hotel in Ballymena.

Plant Stall

Before and after each meeting there is a plant stall, where everyone can buy plants and bring plants to sell. At present Pat and George Gordon have worked tirelessly to run an excellent stall and as this is a major source of income we need everyone to contribute. If you can help in any way it will be appreciated especially at Show time and Pat and George will be only too pleased to help and advise on suitable plants both to bring or buy. At Christmas this stall takes the form of a Christmas Fayre.

Book Stall

Operated by Professor Amyan Macfadyen, the bookstall has a comprehensive range of publications and A.G.S. books can be ordered. There are also second-hand books and back issues of the AGS bulletins. Please give it every support and help to carry the books would also be appreciated.

Tea

After every lecture there is a very welcome cup of tea or coffee, in the past organised by two self-sacrificing members. To ease this chore, in future this will be shared out, although still keeping a biscuit rota. As the social contact over a cuppa is important, I am sure everyone will be happy to help.

Badges

To make it easier to get to know each other name badges are given to all new members and can be replaced for a small fee. These are made by our Programme Secretary, Heather Smith who also provides the very professional title and plant name slides.

Termonfeckin

For some years now the Dublin Group of the A.G.S. have organised a weekend in November in An Grianan, Termonfeckin near Drogheda. The house was originally a Bishop's Palace, now converted into a Horticulture College and run by the Irish Countrywoman's Association. There are invited speakers of international repute, (this year John & Hilary Birks, Norway, & Ian & Margaret Young, Scotland,) plant sales, plant auctions, a quiz, with a Dinner on Saturday evening. With beautiful surroundings, good food and interesting company it all makes for an excellent weekend break. Booking forms and programmes are available at our A.G.M. meeting or enquiries to: Mrs. Joan Carvill, 2 Albert Tce., Crofton Road, Dun Laoghaire. Tel.01 2809229, or M.0872077991.

Shows by Pat Crossley

This is a precis of a more detailed account of the Shows written by our Show Secretary, Mrs. Pat Crossley, in the first Newsletter, and she will always be pleased to give more information.

Members' Show

For some twenty years March is the month when a "Members' Show" has been held – a schedule drawn up to encompass classes suitable from beginners to the more experienced.

The Members' Show is open to ALL AGS Ulster Group members and was conceived to encourage the first time exhibitor, who would hopefully become addicted.

This is purely a local show and points awarded are not credited towards merit medals of the main AGS Show department.

The Alpine Garden Society – Ulster Show

This important annual event is just one of twenty five such shows held throughout Great Britain and Ireland. It is organised by the Show Secretary under the direction of the current Director of Shows at Pershore.

The Show is the Ulster Group's shop window when the general public can see and enjoy many alpine gems and perhaps become more involved.

It should be emphasised that all exhibitors at A.G.S. Shows must be FULL members of the Society, not just the Ulster Group.

The future of the Ulster Show depends on new exhibitors coming forward and also new members helping the team effort. So please support our hard working Show Secretary and the show committee in her request to "Keep on Growing and Showing Alpines".

Greenmount

The Annual Show has taken place in recent years at Greenmount College, Antrim, which provides the ideal environment. To encourage an interest in alpines, the Ulster Group initiated a travel bursary which is awarded to horticultural students deemed worthy by the College. Members also subscribed to the alpine section in the very attractive walled garden.

Garden Visits and Outings

Firstly thanks to all our members who so kindly open their gardens to us in both winter and summer months. These visits always prove popular and most enjoyable and we appreciate all the work, gardening skills and hospitality that this entails. Details of each year's visits are circulated in the spring and in future we shall ask for a return slip to give our hosts some idea of numbers. China is available and help with tea or coffee. If you would be prepared for us to visit your garden in 2004 or 2005 Heather Smith would be delighted to hear from you – it does not matter what size it is or how many alpines – we all enjoy seeing different gardens and ideas and also revisiting gardens to see how they have changed.

A longer garden visit has been organised each year by Mrs. Margaret Glynn, (an account of this year's given earlier) all proving very popular and enjoyable thanks to Margaret. Next year it may venture further afield to Czechoslovakia if members are interested.

An added footnote for all gardeners – fine Cambark @ £8.00 per bag is available from Bob Gordon.

Website

We do have a website – www.nireland.com/alpine – which at present gives our annual programme and also that of the Dublin Group. There are a some show pictures and links to other alpine gardening sites but we do exercise caution and do not advertise any individual addresses etc. As we are at the beginning of the learning curve all ideas are very welcome. In keeping with the new millennium some of our members communicate by email but addresses are only published with permission.