



Alpine Garden Society Ulster Group

Plant of the Month, May 2022

Primula 'Drumcliff' – by George Gordon

Joe Kennedy had a long association with the Ulster Group of the Alpine Garden Society.

When my wife Pat and I started to take plants to our annual show at Greenmount, Joe had a non-competitive display of his primulas, all bred at his garden in Ballycastle, and this was a marvel to behold. It earned him a special gold medal from the Society. I wish I had taken a photograph to remind me of all the different primulas on display. Some had local north Antrim place



names like “*Glenshesk*” and “*Knocklayd*”. I suspect that not all have survived, but two still in cultivation are connected to the Ulster Group. “*Dark Rosaleen*” was named after Gordon Toner’s wife. Gordon is now our vice-president, and has documented this in [Plant of the month May 2015](#). The other is “*Maisie Michael*” (another member who had a marvellous garden in north Antrim that Joe visited) and Liam Byrne from the Dublin Group has recounted how it got its name in their Newsletter no 58 for Summer 2012 (it can be downloaded from the [Dublin Group website](#)). It was featured by Joan McCaughey as [Plant of the Month June 2016](#).

When Joe retired he passed on his remaining stock to Fitzgerald Nurseries, Oldtown, Stoneyford, Co Kilkenny, They have named two of them and distributed them internationally, keeping Joe’s Irish primulas in cultivation and introducing them to a new and appreciative group of growers. One is “*Drumcliff*” and the other “*Innisfree*”. In Northern Ireland they have been on sale in Lidl for a few years at a very reasonable price, but only once a year in late March or early April when they are in flower.

“*Drumcliff*” has probably inherited its dark foliage from the “*Guinivere*”, an old Irish hybrid of long-standing. Like all primulas it appreciates being divided and moved to new ground to keep it healthy. Never let it dry out. The archetypal Irish primula is *Primula vulgaris* and if you mimic its habitat on a shady bank with a cool root run you can probably do no wrong with “*Drumcliff*”. Vine weevils are the curse of primulas, and there is no easy answer (we surely all have them) except to have more than one plant planted in different places.

For those interested, the Irish Garden Plant Society published “*A Heritage of Beauty*” by E. Charles Nelson in 2000. It contains a lot of information on Irish primulas, including many of Joe’s named hybrids.

You can still see Maisie Michael’s garden as it was documented in “[How Does Your Garden Grow](#)” for Ulster Television. (thanks to Mark Smyth for providing the archive link)