



HPS
HARDY PLANT SOCIETY

South Pennine Group

Newsletter



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Seasonal items, reflections and plans for 2026 welcome.

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Cover picture Dahlias from the National Botanic Gardens, Dublin: Clockwise from left, D. Normandie Wedding Day, D. Kennemerland , D Asquith Minnie, D . Evelyn Foster. Above: a view of the Dahlia border at the National Botanic Gardens, Dublin.

Chairman's Ramblings

Tricia Fraser

Happy 30th Anniversary to us! I hope members have enjoyed our celebrations this year, particularly the Renishaw event in early September.

It was a lovely day featuring a buffet lunch (goody boxes of leftovers available at the end!), an excellent slide show, curated and given by Don, which covered many of our earliest garden visits and, after lunch, a guided tour of the gardens. I'd like to thank Linda Headford, who volunteers in the garden at Renishaw, for liaising with the staff there, who, because of Linda's involvement, let us have the Rex Whistler room for free, and also Don and Dot for all they did to organise the day.

We have also enjoyed our usual activities: two very successful plant sales (thanks to Toni and all helpers for ensuring everything runs smoothly), several more garden visits (again thanks to Don for organising these) and a varied programme of speakers, including several we haven't heard before. Having booked them all myself, I can only hope they pleased most members who came to hear the likes of Troy Scott-Smith, Ken Thompson and Peter Williams, to name three of my favourite speakers this year.

As we head towards the end of this 30th anniversary year, I'm indulging in a bit of nostalgia as I look back over 30 very happy years as an HPS, local and special interest group member. It's been great to indulge in our shared passion for perennials alongside so many very knowledgeable members who have become good friends over the years. I sometimes wonder just how many different perennials we have grown or tried to grow over our collective gardening lifetimes. There can't be many we haven't tried.

One thing joining the HPS and South Pennine Group back in 1995 taught me, was not to worry if a plant died or grew too big. Removing these dead or thuggish plants left another planting opportunity in the garden which I could always fill from our plant sales table at meetings, often for very little money, and definitely for less than I was paying for garden centre plants.

I became more adventurous in trying new plants. An early memory was of Judy Harry, who became HPS chairman sometime in the late 1990s and gave a talk on 'Thugs and Fairies' in the garden. The latter being those somewhat ephemeral plants that tend to disappear when we aren't checking on them. We've all grown a few of these types of plants over the years.

I originally joined the SPG committee in 1998, as secretary, followed by terms as Vice Chairman/Speaker bookings and finally Chairman. I stood down in 2010 after 12 years and then returned to the committee in 2019 to help book speakers. I think I'm the ninth Chairman in our thirty years, but so far the only member daft enough to take on the role twice, though Dot went above and beyond and was chairman for more than 5 years, which counts as two terms of office.

Volunteer needed to undertake Speaker bookings

I wrote in the last newsletter, that I would like someone to take over the speaker bookings but so far no one has volunteered. All speakers are booked for 2026 but if there isn't a volunteer soon, then we won't have any talks in 2027. The job can be shared so perhaps two members can take it on. Please think about it – I can give lots of help, ideas and lists of speakers we have had so although it might seem daunting, it really isn't.

Finally my thanks also go to all the committee for their hard work and to other members who help at meetings, providing refreshments, manning the shop and setting out and putting the chairs away. Every little helps as the advert goes!



30th Anniversary celebrations at Renishaw

Upcoming talks

November 5th - 7:00

November is our Annual General Meeting so we start at the earlier time of 7:00 with the speaker at 7:30.

Our speaker is Diane Clement, stalwart of the Alpine Garden Society. She is a witty and informed speaker and will talk on **‘The Dark Months—not just snowdrops’**. She has a wide range of plant interests, including hepaticas, cyclamen, bulbous plants and woodland plants.

There are Committee vacancies for Speaker Organiser and Plant Sales Publicity roles.

December 3rd - 7:30

Martin and Jill Fish **‘Gardening on the Menu’**. Martin and Jill are a husband and wife horticultural team who speak on a range of horticultural topics with a focus on the practical. This talk is a seasonal take on their book *Gardening on the Menu* which is a guide to growing and cooking fruit and vegetables. The talk will include food for us to sample.

January

Don Witton returns (weather permitting) to give the talk postponed from last January due to snow: **‘Flower Power Plus Plus Plus!’** A talk stuffed with flowers of every shade, shape and colour. The perfect antidote to Winter.

Whacks Wicked Plants

You may have seen Whacks Wicked Plants at shows such as the RHS show at Wentworth this summer, They stock an enormous range of hardy and semi-hardy carnivorous plants.

Some may see these fly catchers as a useful addition to a greenhouse or garden others maybe more squeamish. Their nursery is at Scampston, with the entrance off the car park to the famous walled garden of the same name. This summer they held an open day, the nursery being normally open by appointment. I find these plants both fascinating and beautiful., particularly the Sarracenias with the wide variety of colour, shade, pattern and texture. Mature plants will set you back around £30 but they do set seed and don't come true from seed so an opportunity for interesting hybrids.—Niall Clarke



Left: Sarracenia leucophylla hybrid

Top right: Dionaea muscipula 'Fuzzy Tooth'

Above: Sarracenia minor x rubra 'Long lid'

<https://wackswickedplants.co.uk/contact-us/>

Summer MAD Garden Visits

Don Witton



Pomegranate Road

Our series of 'MAD' garden visits continued on June 5th with a visit to our chairman's Tricia and Alistair's much downsized garden on **Pomegranate Road** in Chesterfield. Sixteen members turned out which was fine as the garden wouldn't take big numbers. It threatened to rain as we gathered but fortunately it held off and we all had a great time viewing and discussing the plants on view. There was a well-stocked border across the back of the garden and plenty of Geranium and Erodium interest both in the front garden, raised bed, pots and greenhouse. The visit was finished off with hot drinks and cake. Thank you Tricia and Alistair for sharing with us.



Pomegranate Road

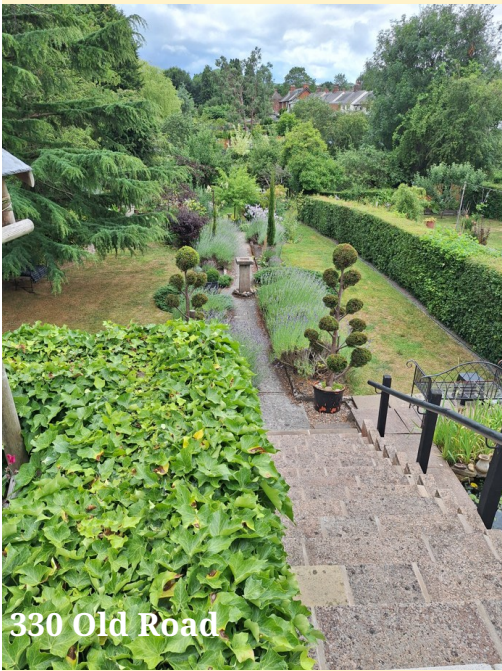
In early July, 28 members headed to Chesterfield again to see the Yellow Book garden at **330 Old Road** which had been voted the winner of Chesterfield in Bloom 'Best Large Garden'. It was really two gardens as the long 'L' shaped garden had a gate at the end which opened into a relative's intensively planted back garden (photograph page 9, top)



330 Old Road



It was a warm summer afternoon and twenty eight of us made the trip. What a treat we all had as there were lots of hardy plant interest to look at and discuss and then we all moved our chairs from the house into the garden to have our refreshments in the warm summer sunshine.



330 Old Road

We don't always have a MAD visit in August as it's holiday season, so I was pleased that fourteen people turned up at Victoria Quays to view Sheffield's **Grey to Green** project. It's not a traditional garden but a series of island beds which start at Park Square roundabout and go along Castlegate, Bridge Street to West Bar. I had visited about a year ago to check if it was worth a visit but after a long hot dry spring and summer, I was unsure of what to expect. Well, what a pleasant surprise as there was plenty of hardy plants on view and lots of late summer flowers to see. It's about a mile and a half out and back and we all had a great time viewing the planting and socialising as we slowly walked the route. There are plenty more projects on the go so there will be more to see in years to come.



Grey to Green

The only downside was the modern scourge of litter which was evident in one or two areas but it didn't stop us from enjoying ourselves. After the walk we all had lunch at the café in Victoria Quays.

Grow something new from seed

Simon Silcock

My journey into gardening began when, aged seven, I was given a very old packet of wallflower seeds by a great aunt. As we had no garden at the time, I found some soil, put it in a bucket and watered them. They grew – they were wallflowers after all – and I was hooked.

By my mid-teens, I'd found out about Chilterns Seeds whose wonderful catalogues always challenge you to Grow something new from seed. The obsession deepened.

Becoming an adult meant that I finally my own house and garden and the spare cash to buy even more seeds and plants. By 2001, I had a south-facing back garden which I converted into a large gravel bed. It was the perfect place to plant out my collection of bulbs and to it were added other plants to give year-round interest. This was when I first started growing Bearded Irises. I began with a few Standard Dwarf Bearded (SDB) Irises (which did well in the gravel) and through a visit to Seagate Irises moved into Tall Bearded (TB) Irises. It was at Seagate that I talked with the (now



former) owner about Iris breeding and its practicalities. Five years later and I emigrated to Bulgaria taking with me a fair collection of species, Bearded and a few Arilbred Irises (such as Iris 'Vera-Olivia' bred by Lawrence Ransom in France). They loved their new home. They set seed on their own without me even trying. I collected and sowed this open-pollinated seed. I also began making my own deliberate crosses where I knew both parents rather than just relying on what the bees had decided to do. In the climate of Bulgaria, these often only took three years to flower from sowing. I had more Irises than I knew what to with. Some weren't anything to be particularly proud of. Crossing Iris trojana with modern TB Irises gave a rainbow of different colour-combinations in the manner of the Benton End Irises bred by Cedric Morris (great for bedding out but not really meriting names of their own).

A few years later, I joined the Aril Society International based in America. Through their plant sale, I was able to really indulge my passion and begin on a whole new range of Iris crosses. Arilbred irises are, in general, descended from species which grow in areas with a dry summer climate so they grow very well in Bulgaria. We were additionally gifted additional plants by the owners of the Lomar Iris Garden/ Plantas Distintas in Spain. Some of these had been passed on to them by French Arilbred hybridiser Lawrence Ransom. I had a lot of different cultivars to play around with so now the fun really did begin. I learned (through experience and research) which crosses would work and which wouldn't. I recorded successful crosses and used this to inform the next season's pairings.

I sowed the seeds and they grew well. Not all made it to flowering. Pests such as mole crickets and voles can do that. Many of the offspring again aren't worth naming but when they are your own "babies" you really don't care.

Continued ➡

The photographs below and on page 10 show the result of different crosses between various types of bearded and Arilbred irises.



After joining the North American Lily Society, I started buying in seed from their exchanges as well as making my own crosses. I read an article from one hybridiser who stated that you need to have an endpoint in mind when you make a cross rather than just making random crosses. It makes sense but the random crosses idea also works for me to see what will happen. Again, not every hybrid I've made is a show-stopper but there is something about having made that cross yourself. I've had lilies flower within three years of the seed being sown in Bulgaria but here in England they seem (for me) much slower. The photos below show the result of crossing *Lilium* 'Lionheart' and *Lilium* 'Sweet Surrender'. 'Lionheart' is like many Dutch bred lilies selected for its upright and congested grouping of flowers which work well in a vase. I love the colours but don't like the form. 'Sweet Surrender' is in my opinion more elegant with its pendant flowers. Their offspring (pictured below) varied in which traits they inherited but again I like some of the combinations which work better for me in the garden.



Our 30th Anniversary Celebrations

Don Witton

It was a very pleasant early Autumn morning when Dot and I arrived at the Rex Whistler Room at Renishaw Hall at 11am. With a starting time of 12.30 we knew members would start

arriving before 12.00 so wanted to check that everything was ready and prepare things for the slide presentation. Well, what a surprise greeted us as we entered the room. The staff had worked very hard preparing the room and it looked like it was about to host a very posh wedding reception.

Members started arriving at 11.45 and when Charlotte Swain and Karine Nohr arrived just before 12.30 (they had cycled all the way from Sheffield), 47 members were ready to party. The buffet was fantastic with lots of savouries and loads of cakes and hot drinks to follow.



Continued ➡

Our 30th Anniversary Celebrations contd

After the buffet, yours truly gave a PowerPoint presentation looking back over the years at many of the garden / nursery visits we have arranged for members. These visits have become known as MAD visits (Meet At Destination). This was followed by a mass group photo of everyone outside in the courtyard. Have you ever tried to get 47 adults to stand still, stop talking and all look the same way at the same time? Well, it isn't easy!



After a small break for toilets etc we gradually all gathered at the entrance to the garden for a guided tour. The original plan was to go round the garden with the Head Gardener David Kesteven but he was on holiday so our tour guide was one of the house staff who is responsible for the archives. Well, what a mine of information she was. I think we all learned something that we never knew about Renishaw – even regular visitors like us.



The garden, despite the hot dry summer, was looking fantastic with late summer /

early autumn colour in abundance. Looking particularly good were the Arnie Maynard borders and the hot border had plenty of late summer floral colour to talk about.



After the garden tour there was a bit of a rush as it was well past 4 o' clock and the whole place closes at 4.30. None of us managed to get locked in and we all headed home with fond memories of a great 30th anniversary MAD event.



An Evening with Bob Flowerdew



If you are a Radio 4 Gardener's Question Time regular, you'll be very familiar with Bob Flowerdew, not on TV as much as he used to be, overtaken by a younger trendier and more predictable set of presenters. He came to the Civic in Barnsley in

July for 'an evening with' and a few of us from the local u3a went along. The first of the two hours was generally horticultural, the second, unexpectedly, more eclectic with poetry and what you might describe as musings and reflections on life albeit with a horticultural slant. He is the champion of up-cycling, recycling, probably side cycling and passionate about organic gardening. Organic, but not in a naïve irritating way; encouraging us to think through what is being advised and sometimes be sceptical of the corporate message.

Using old freezers as water butts: they're designed to hold liquid, have inbuilt drainage, paint them black if you want and why not? The official messaging is we shouldn't as they will leak refrigeration gasses and need professional recycling but a broken freezer has probably degassed itself already.

He reminded us that gardening books tend to be written by experts, often with staff, after perfection in every fruit and vegetable. Perhaps we should think about what a particular technique is trying to achieve and decide if that is important for us before applying it. Why take on fiddly and difficult work if it isn't going to result in something you want. If you don't have melon bowls of a particular size, don't worry about the size of your melons.

Birdboxes took a knocking. The ones we have thrust at us commercially have vertical edges. No natural tree hollow has vertical edges. Nests in birdboxes tend to flatten and the eggs roll into the corners making it difficult or impossible for the brooding bird to rotate them as they would in natural surroundings. This is leading, apparently, to increased mortality with less chicks per batch surviving. A solution, chamfer the edges with Polyfilla. Or cover a balloon with several layers of paper mâché. When its dried cut a hole in it for the birds to come in and out of and hang it on a tree.

He reminisced at the make-over gardening phenomenon popular on TV some years back and confided that getting the gardens back in shape for the 'revisit' segment at the end of a programme, often cost more than the original makeover – reminding us that gardens are highly individual things and giving a 'Chelsea' garden to a complete novice is ridiculous. However the lesson for us all being how often do we set ourselves up to fail.

We heard about a RHS potato trial, the results of which include details of haulm heights, flower colours, tuber shape, colour and depth of eyes but nothing about the taste.

Horticultural Shows can be equally misfocused on anything but the taste of the specimen. You only need to pause for a moment to realise how silly it is ignoring taste as a prizewinning criteria and how discouraging this might be to the newcomer growing vegetables.

OK, so it was probably more fruit and vegetables than hardy plants but Bob, not a fan of genetic modification, is clearly a hardy plants person at heart. While (seriously) recommending we look at perennial edibles rather than annuals or biennials, on the basis they are more productive and sustainable, his wish was for a genetically modified carrot or onion tree. And why not. An odd and very enjoyable evening.

His website is <https://bobflowerdew.com/> from where the pictures above are taken, with his permission.



September Plant Sale

Our autumn plant sale was 14% up on takings compared to 2024, with total sales of £4737. Toni Frascina, without whose project management it is difficult to imagine the event happening, reports we sold 1295 plants or five per minute. When the growers and the Dorothy Fox centre are paid it will leave a useful sum in our bank account to pay for speakers.





“First, thank you to all of you working so hard to grow, publicise, help customers and take their money, make tea – its a real team effort and everyone mucks in and gets on with it.

Second, a special thanks to the weather Gods for turning the Saturday monsoon into Sunday sunshine!

And last but definitely not least, thanks to Jean Gater. Jean has organised the publicity for the sales for 12 years or so. Our attendance and sales figures are testimony to her efforts. But Jean has decided to stand down from this role. If there is anyone who would like to help out with plant sales publicity, even in a small way, please get in touch. Jean is happy to support and advise you through the first sale.”

– Toni Frascina



Peat Free Composts

Tricia Fraser

Continuing on from the article in our last newsletter on peat free composts, I freely admit I don't like the very fibrous peat free composts – any I've bought have ended up being used as mulch/dug into our garden. Other non-fibrous peat free composts I have used successfully are:

Petersfield Composts: I came across this range when volunteering for the National Trust in the garden at Eyam Hall (no longer NT). The gardener had ordered too many bags so I was able to buy some at cost price. When the NT lease came to an end in 2018 I had to find an alternative, but it was a very good peat free compost. I have emailed to see if we could buy it locally or have it delivered. Perhaps a group order could be arranged? (No reply as yet).

Melcourt Sylvagrow: Local stockists are Dore Moor Garden Centre, Chatsworth Garden Centre and Millthorpe Nurseries which stock the Sylvagrow multipurpose compost. It's about £10 per 40L bag. I have used their peat free multi purpose which is OK for potting on but I use slow release feed as well. Very friable. Last year I found I couldn't get erodium cuttings or seeds to grow/germinate using it, so I am now using seed and cutting compost with John Innes for these.

Rocket gro – I have tried this in 2025 and so far the results are good. Dunstan Hall Garden Centre stock the peat free multipurpose compost at two 40L bags for £16 or £8.99 per bag. I would like to get hold of their seed and cutting compost to try as well.

JPR Farm Direct: A final suggestion, which would need several members to club together is to try JPR Farm Direct's peat free potting compost. I don't know the price of a half bulk bag or how many litres it contains, but having seen a sample of it at a plant show, it looks worth trying. I don't use enough to buy a half bag for myself so this would need to be shared. If anyone is interested then do let me know.

Conclusion – some experimentation is needed to find a peat free compost that suits your needs, and I hope my short review helps members.

Links

<https://www.petersfieldgrowing.com/retail-range>

<https://melcourt.co.uk/products/sylvagrow-multi-purpose/>

<https://rocketgro.co.uk/>

<https://jprfarmdirect.co.uk/product/peat-free-potting-compost/>

Linda Headford emailed to say at Renishaw Greenhouses they grow hundreds of plants from seeds and cuttings throughout the year. For the last few years they've used Melcourt peat-free compost with the excellent results as you can see in these photographs she sent.



Clare Burnell emailed this feedback

“Last year I used basic B&Q compost, the texture and quality were poor. This year I looked for seed compost without success. I have been using Westland peat free multi-purpose compost with John Innes. I found if I sieve the compost the texture and germination rate is good. I saved the larger bits and added them back in when potting up plants. However, I am unhappy with using this compost for growing on, because it is difficult to tell when plants need watering and the plants progress very slowly.”

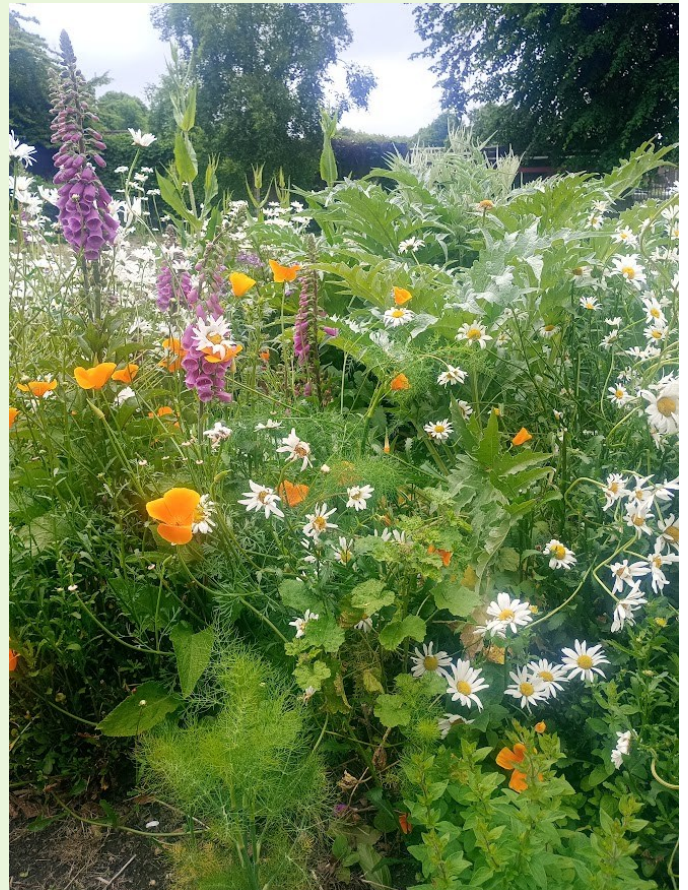
Drought

Despite the recent rain we are still under drought regulations in South Yorkshire (October 2025) with unessential use bans still in force and likely to remain so into 2026. With water butts overflowing this may seem counter intuitive but Yorkshire Water will be abstracting differently from rivers to enable reservoirs to fill. This change in practice requires drought orders which, in turn, require hose pipe bans to be in place for them to be legal.

Now is probably the time to start planning next summer's water storage as you probably noticed many suppliers of water tanks ran short of stock in the Spring and Summer. Anyway you'll want them to fill while its raining not be new and empty come next April. When looking to buy a water tank, I found it best to search online for 'water tanks' not 'water butts' as serious gardeners like ourselves will probably want decent sized storage. 'Water butts' seem to be a lot more expensive than 'water tanks', a sign perhaps of suppliers taking advantage of the more naïve gardener.

Clare Burnell wrote during the summer:

"In our local community garden (pictured), we have been trying not to water some areas of the garden at all. Here the hardy perennials have done well. I think their growth has been slower but the plants are sturdier. The Cynara cardunculus (cardoons) got hit badly by blackflies which could be due to the lack of rain. The sturdy Leucanthemum vulgare (oxeye daisies), grown from Hardy Plant Society seeds, have liked having a Chelsea chop."



The tall plants, Foeniculum vulgare (fennel), Cephalaria gigantea (giant scabious) and Alcea (hollyhocks) flowered well. However, we did water anything that was newly planted and any useful dying plants, like the rudbeckias we value for Autumn colour.”

Janet Lister has installed a solar powered watering system (pictured below) and being solar powered works automatically from sun-rise but doesn't water when its cloudy (or wet, should it ever rain). The water storage has lasted her up to a month, so handy when they're away. She does take it in in the winter as frost can burst the pipework.



**Looking down
Withens Brook to
the A628 and
Woodhead
Reservoir from the
Holmfirth Road,
June 2025**



Achilleas—a healthy obsession

John Cullen of John Cullen Gardens spoke to us in June.

John and his partner Hugh Faulds (left and right in the picture below) were made redundant from traditional London City jobs in the financial crash of 2007/8. John retrained as a garden designer and Hugh undertook floristry. Their design business started in North London where gradually they grew more and more plants of their own for their clients – a back garden nursery which grew into direct selling to the public at London markets where they were spotted by the RHS and encouraged to show. He paid especial tribute to the support they continue to get from Carol Kline. In 2015 they upped sticks and moved from Enfield to rural Lincolnshire between Boston and Spalding. They never used chemicals, so the agricultural practices of their potential neighbours guided them in choosing their new location, surrounded by organic farmers. In 2018 Plant Heritage asked them take on the National



Collection of Achilleas. The nursery has a strong emphasis on the RHS 'plants for pollinators' initiative and their website allows you to filter on different pollinators as well as the usual criteria of plant type, colour, price etc. You can select for plants which, say, moths or long tongued bees prefer.

The plant Achillea is named after the Greek Hero, Achilles. The legend says his mother, Thetis, used yarrow-laced water in a bath to make him strong but a missed spot on his heel which remained vulnerable. Another account suggests Achilles used the herb to heal his wounded soldiers during battle. The plant's Latin name, *Achillea millefolium*, directly

references this legendary association, while the herb is known for its antiseptic, anti-inflammatory, and wound-healing properties.

Older varieties have a reputation for being invasive but modern varieties are sterile. John identified the following positive features which make Achillea a must-have:

- Easy to grow and can be divided at any time of the year.
- Diverse height range: The 'New Vintage' series at 35mm, 'Seduction Series' at 50mm to 'Gold Plate' at 1.2m.
- They work with different planting styles, cottage garden, meadow, drifts or as signature plants in pots.
- Drought tolerant once established.
- Great for short-tongued bees and parasitic wasps.

And a favourite? Achillea millefolium 'Pomegranate' a mid height (50mm) deep magenta flower which doesn't bleach out in the sun.

The Achilleas below were spotted at the Wentworth Woodhouse RHS Show in July.



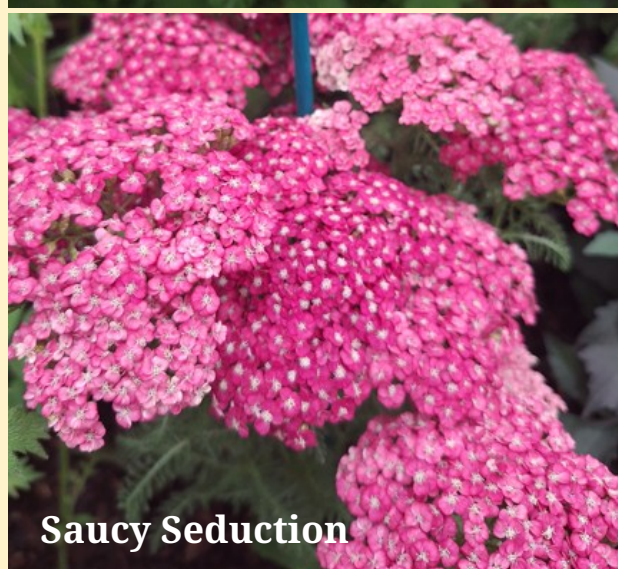
Pomegranate



New Vintage White



Strawberry Seduction



Saucy Seduction

Unnatural Gardening

Peter Williams spoke to us in July.

Continuing a theme in recent talks of challenging the orthodoxy, Peter Williams, a retired plant lecturer from York St. John University, tackled a number of themes around 'gardening with and for nature'. It would be difficult for those of us who enjoy horticulture not to respect and enjoy the natural world but is there a scientific underpinning to 'natural planting', 'favouring natives', 'bug hotels' and the such? It is difficult to open a gardening magazine or turn on a gardening TV programme without being bombarded with such messages.

Favouring natives



We are told native plants are the best for native wildlife. However native slugs enjoy our hostas, our bees love the bountiful nectar source from Himalayan Balsam, and our small native birds gorge themselves on alien seeds we buy at inflated prices during the winter. There is also the thorny question 'what is native?'. We sometimes define it as a plant that arrived naturally, without human intervention, after the last ice age or persisted

through it. Is this a somewhat arbitrary definition that quite pointedly separates humans from the natural world? Is 'native' itself a somewhat arbitrary concept?

Naturalistic planting

Why do we think curved beds with trees and shade and floppy plants is natural but regimented bedding isn't? Both are artificially created, need human intervention to keep them as we would want. There is nothing intrinsically right or wrong about either. He showed us picture of a meadow near to where he lived, Thornton Ings between York and Pocklington. As close to a native meadow we would have in England. It requires maintenance but was very different to the colourful mixes we are sold as 'meadow mix'. Owen Hayman returned to meadows in our October talk.



The 'unnatural' meadow planting above, seen here in Co. Dublin, is nice to look at and full of wildlife.



Our relict medieval meadows, like Thornton Ings are predominately perennials, the meadow seed mixes we're sold are predominantly annuals. Embrace 'naturalistic planting' or 'prairie planting' as a design style, by all means but recognise that is what it is, a design style.

Peter emphasised that he isn't in anyway anti-conservation; as a scientist, he was challenging us to be clear about our thinking and motivation, to avoid lazy emotion and corporate packaging designed to lever us away from our money. Think of the value of the fat-balls and Niger seed industry. Again his message was to look at the science, not the emotional message. Hedgehogs don't eat slugs by choice, they favour ground beetles, which are a predator of slugs – but please don't go out and discourage hedgehogs! Or magpies, or pigeons or cats for that matter. So called traditional gardens with neat borders, sharp lines are full of wildlife. He referred to *Wildlife of a Garden: A Thirty-year Study* by Jennifer Owen. In her standard family garden in suburban Leicester she recorded over 2,500 species ranging from plants to mammals, some not previously recorded in gardens, primarily because no one had previously looked. (Continued ➡)

Are we being fleeced?

You may recall Ken Thompson's talk in May where he debunked volcanic rock dust as a beneficial soil additive. To that list we might now add various plant care products that utilize mycorrhizal fungi to enhance plant growth and soil health. Although mycorrhizal fungi is essential to plant health, it is a delicate organism, easily desiccated and it is unlikely there is any viable organism left by the time the packet gets through the garden centre to you.

Peter wasn't dismissing care and respect for the natural world. The message is, don't be taken in by the latest trend or fad, be sceptical and look at the science behind the product. Our gardens are already nature reserves.



Applying Best Practice

Doug Stewart spoke to us in September

When Doug Stewart spoke to us he very bravely did so not just without PowerPoint but driven by questions from the floor. As Tricia pointed out at the end, asking if there were any questions seemed pointless. Doug has spent his horticultural life looking at plant trials and new thinking.

Define best practice – a much abused term. To Doug it meant something trialled and researched at a leading horticultural establishment (eg Kew), then further trialled in a real garden with full peer review before being adopted—thoroughly evidence based.

Not just something randomly thought to be a good idea either by an academic or otherwise – it needs testing in real gardens. Quite reputable authors and books can, he said, advise quite contradictory things.

Gardening science is far from settled. One example he spoke about, prompted by a question, was garlic rust; why some plants may be affected while neighbouring plants are not. Current investigations are looking at the ecosystems of bacteria on the leaves of the plant which may differentially attract the spores which carry the rust. There are studies into how to manage the correct bacteria, including looking at altering the pH of the leaf.

Doug suggested there may be a point where you need to humbly accept you can't grow something. However do keep notes as to what you tried and what worked and didn't.

There were some direct messages:

*The right plant in the right place
doesn't need irrigation or feeding.*

*Manure doesn't improve heavy soils
nor does grit improve the drainage in
clays. Mulching (on the top, not dug in)
is probably the only soil 'improver'.*

We heard that it is bacteria and Mycorrhizal Fungi which enable plants to take up nutrients and water and forking and digging can disrupt this process. However there is no published research on no-dig per se despite the evidence in favour building up.

With winter coming on there was a reminder to leave leaves under shrubs to rot down of their own accord and to practice chop and drop where you can and only take to the compost heap what is necessary.

The talk was lively and full of information and no Power Point was a distinct and welcome change.



