Damp but Invigorated in Dunblane

Stan da Prato

Saturday 21 February was still damp, but markedly milder than recent weeks, which had been dominated by wet raw easterlies, making the colours and activities in the Victoria Hall especially welcome. Well before the official start time of nine o'clock, people were bringing in plants for display and food for the kitchen, while the nurseries were setting up their stalls at either side of the main hall. Being able to buy and get advice from specialist growers is one of the attractions of the early bulb day. John Amand had his usual wide range of bulbous plants, Jonathan Harris had a specialist snowdrop stand, while Macplants and Hartside both offered a good range of alpines. As usual, the club 50:50 stall had many bargains, not least *Galanthus* 'Elizabeth Harrison' for a tenner.

The non-competitive display in the lesser hall had fewer snowdrops than used to be the case but they still attracted interest, with several folk commenting that no snowdrop deserves to be called 'Trumps'. Some as yet unnamed seedlings were also of interest.

Bulbous iris with twelve pots was the most numerous genus. Several *reticulata* hybrids were on show from the almost white 'Painted Lady' to the purple of new cultivar 'Rejoice'. Most agree these iris can be short lived in pots. I find cultivars developed from *Iris histrioides* more reliably perennial. A pot of the selection 'Lady Beatrix Stanley', said to be very similar to the wild species, was on show. The most common cross between *I. histrioides* and *I. winogradowii*, 'Katharine Hodgkin', wasn't on the bench, but the closely related, and frequently misspelled, 'Sheila Ann Germaney' was, as was the yellow sport 'Katharine's Gold'. Not often seen at shows, *Iris histrio* var. *aintabensis* was also on the bench.

With *Cyclamen*, all but a single pot of *C. alpinum* were forms of *C. coum*, no two exactly alike. Scillas included two pots, correctly spelled, of the reliable but unpronounceable *S. mischtschenkoana* 'Tubergeniana'. A nice pot of what



most know as *Scilla melaina* carried the synonym *Othocallis*. Two clearly different plants from different suppliers, both labelled *Corydalis tauricola*, demonstrated that nursery labels are not always reliable. Five different crocus stood up well to the warm room, as did the yellow look-alike *Ipheion sellowianum*. Most of the *Narcissus* were *bulbocodium* types, the exception being a small pot, probably of *N.* 'Betty Mae'.

Non-bulb interest included *Helleborus lividus* and *H. thibetanus*, a pillar box red *Skimmia japonica pabella*, a nice fish-box trough and an indoor *Amaryllis*, which most gardeners refuse to call *Hippeastrum*. A bowl of what was *Rosularia pallida* has now to be called *Chaloupkaea aizoon*, yet another botanical name change.

Dave Hardy's first talk, *A Year on the Farm – Life as a Daffodil Bulb Grower at Esker Farm Daffodils* gave an entertaining behind-the-scenes look at his family's life as daffodil growers, from planting and propagation to lifting, cleaning and preparing bulbs for shows and sales, with insights into the breeding of new varieties, field management, coping with weather and other challenges. In the afternoon he followed with *Daffodils, Snowdrops and Beyond* ... this self-confessed bulbaholic family's collection now includes snowdrops, crocus, lilies and many others. Their expanding assemblage is housed in a seriously large greenhouse. Dave also reflected on plant shows, the role of the RHS–he is on their *Expert Bulb Group*, and he stressed the human side of horticulture.

All day the kitchen team worked (wo)manfully serving tea, excellent home baking, though I never did sample the promised vegetarian sausage roll–it seems the vegetarian had put up a spirited resistance.

The early bulb day succeeds because it offers a variety of activities, making for a good day out without the stress of driving at night. The format is also the basis for the popular autumn show day that has replaced the discussion weekend. Should or could the February day include a competitive show? Growers south of the Border, who participated in a recent club-wide Zoom meeting, pointed out that the AGS runs three shows in February. To do this, more volunteers would have to step forward, not just from the local area.

