



The Scottish Rock Garden Club

Garden Club

Dunblane Early Bulb Display 19th February 2016

As usual Scottish Rockers from all over the country thronged Dunblane's Victoria Hall for the first Club event of 2016. For the first time in many years the weather was to say the least disappointing! Rainy and cold it was a good day to be indoors with rock gardeners for company. Members arrived early with plants for the Early Bulb Display and to get first dibs at the Nursery stands. Highlights are the day

the lectures given by our three excellent speakers, each of whom is a master of his subject. This combination of exhibits, talks, teas, bacon rolls, cakes and plants to buy proves irresistible. **Neil Huntley** of Hartside Nursery, Alston, Cumbria, gave a wonderful over-view of the genus **Roscoea**. He took us from the familiar *R. cautleyoides*, of which they have selected the regal form 'Pennine Purple', through to a tiny Japanese plant yet to be offered for general sale. The gem of the genus must be the white form of *R. humeana*. With his excellent pictures, Neil pointed out the differences in morphology of the various species. Their petals size and shape, stem colour and foliage can all vary. Since the different species vary in height, they are perfect plants to buy from 'the nursery with altitude'!



Roscoea cautleyoides



Roscoea humeana alba

The Roscoeas are members of the Zingiberaceae hence their common name 'hardy gingers'. . Past President Peter Semple was intrigued by this relationship and wondered whether or not the

roots tasted of ginger! Any one who has eaten their Roscos, [as Neil calls them] and knows what they taste like, should email me [sandy.leven@btinternet.com]. I will tell Peter. Thank you Neil for preparing this superb talk for the Early Bulb meeting. Be ready for a swarm of requests for your Roscoeas



Trillium grandiflorum

Past President of the SRGC and retiring nurseryman **Ian Christie** gave the second talk, this time on one of his many favourite genera, **Trillium**. He started with a plant which has been grown in Perthshire and Angus for many years and whose origins were mysterious. It is a big form of *Trillium albidum* with a rose pink flush in the petal bases. Is it 'albidum' or is it not? Several gardens grow this plant but its origins are obscure. Leaving the mystery unsolved, he took us for a stroll round his nursery and garden showing the wonderful clumps of trillium species and forms which he and Anne grow. All the time he interspersed ideas and growing hints. Ian educates his audience by stealth. You listen and

learn by auditory and photographic osmosis. Each picture tells a story. One very important idea shone through, grow from seed! The joy of seeing new plants flower is well worth the 5-7 years wait. Since Christies grow so many species they get wonderful hybrids. These beautiful plants extend the range available to gardeners. Erect flowers, sessile flowers, nodding flowers, drooping flowers or double flowers on plants with plain or spotted leaves, Ian showed them all. The colour range now grown here in Scotland vies with the range we were shown several years ago by the late Fred Case from Michigan. One thing! Is *T. grandiflora* the only species with double flowers? [answer to me as above]. Everyone enjoyed Ian's enthusiasm for plants in general and seed grown Trilliums in particular.



Our third expert was Alan McMurtrie from Toronto. YES that big city in Canada. This was Alan's first visit to Scotland and I have little doubt that when he experienced Saturday's weather he realised why his ancestors emigrated. What a pity that when the snow lay thick on top of Ben Lomond and Ben Ledi that he could not see them. Still they have mountains in mountainous Ontario and he knows what snow looks like. As an aside, there is a Mount Ben Lomond in the Wasatch Range, near Salt Lake City. It was pointed out to us by a nice Mormon family. I fear that some people over there think Ben must have been a trapper or early explorer. When they come to Scotland folks from Utah must think Ben is a very common Christian name! I'm sure Canadians know their bens.

What we wanted to know was, "What do his new *Iris reticulatas* look like? Why and how did he raise them? and Which are the best and most beautiful?" The last point is easiest to answer. "Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder". Everyone had a favourite or several favourites. Alan saw good points in them all! It is rare to have a talk based on the variations one small section of a genus but this is what Alan's work is all about. — I'll backpedal a bit to give some history ---

Alan trained as an electrical engineer, which may explain his sparks of insight as well as his logical and inquiring mind coupled with his attention to detail. On a trip to Switzerland in 1979 he was captivated by displays of bearded Iris. In these he saw the variety of colour combinations possible in the genus *Iris*. Most folk would then proceed to breed bearded Irises. Not so, Alan! After joining various *Iris* societies [of which there must be a few] he focused on the small early flowering species, *I. reticulata*, *danfordiae* and *histrioides*. 'Katharine Hodgkin' took his fancy. This grey-blue/ yellow beauty is a hybrid of *I. winogradowii* [yellow] and *histrioides* [blue] unfortunately it is sterile. Alan thought that using *I. danfordiae* in a cross could open up possibilities of new colour combinations. The commercially available form of *danfordiae* being sterile, Alan set off to Turkey [a long way from Canada!] to collect, legally, *Iris reticulata* and *Iris danfordiae*. Thus he started from scratch.

His breakthrough was when he crossed his *I. danfordiae* with *I. histrioides sophiensis* and 5 or 6 years later got plants with different colours and different markings. Imagine how he must have felt! New hybrids with flowers in new colour combinations. This might have satisfied some growers. Alan persisted and crossed his new hybrids with one another. Thus it took at least ten years to open up the Aladdin's cave of white flowers with blue and yellow markings. Continual refinement, crossing and back crossing and ruthless selection over the next two decades has resulted an unparalleled range of small irises in unimaginable colour combinations. Alan has high hopes for the progeny of "Orange Glow".

John Amand of Jacques Amand Nursery, Clomp hill, Middlesex exhibited about 20 big pans of *I. reticulata* including some of Alan's hybrids. They were the talk of the day! Last year John showed some of these Canadian hybrids. I bought some then and they have already flowered this year. I think they need to be well fed. So already much better than the traditional commercially available *danfordiae*. 'White Caucasus' might be the first of Alan's Irises I came across. Last year 'Eye Catcher' was my favourite. If you thought the range available was fabulous, Alan showed just how much further his work has taken him on the road to even getting orange flowers. After many years of work Alan now has plants in entirely new colour ranges. 'Storm' is purple and yellow. 'Sea Green' is what it says— turquoise and green. 'Mars Landing' is brown. Some combinations are not to everyone's taste but to my mind they will be valuable as display plants when combined with the blues, purples, whites and yellows. If you want yellow Alan has bred 'Sunshine'.

An important part of the lecture was on getting the bulbs to market. In Holland they grow *Iris reticulata* by the hundred thousand in fields. It has taken 30 years to reach this point. Whereas once an individual bulb might have been priceless, now you can buy them for a few pounds for ten. The Dutch will be equally ruthless and will only propagate 'good do-ers' Alan is now working on finding true orange and really pink hybrids. Which grow well. He also pointed out that some of his hybrids have small flowers because they are diploid. He plans to produce Tetraploid hybrids which with their double chromosome count will have bigger flowers. I got lost in the chromosome part of the lecture and just enjoyed the pictures. We must thank Alan for his dedication to this fascinating work and for coming to Dunblane to share his enthusiasm and knowledge with us. Seldom do we get a chance to see behind the scenes of plant breeding nor do we are we given such an insight into one expert's vision.

CANADA LAND OF MAPLE SYRUP AND IRIS HYBRIDS. Look out for them, encourage Alan and reward his dedication by buying and growing some. Jacques Amand will post them to you! Bring them to the Early Bulb Display next year.



Alan McMurtrie's
Iris hybrids grown
and shown by
John Amand





Iris 00-DH-1



Iris Spot On



Iris 02-ID-1



Iris Velvet Smile



Iris Sunshine



Iris Eyecatcher



Iris 98-GP-5



Iris 01-JR-1



Iris Lady Beatrix Stanley



Iris 98-EO-2



This beauty is not a Canadian hybrid but a sport of one of the best known hybrids which many of us grow, 'Katharine Hodgkin'. The hybrid was made by E.B. Anderson [a friend of our late friend Kath Dryden. She frequently quoted from the sayings of 'EB'. 'Katharine Hodgkin' is a hybrid between I. histrioides [blue] and I. winogradowii [pale yellow] whose flowers are a mixture of grey, blue and yellow. In 'Katharine Gold' the grey and blue have been lost resulting in a delightfully marked flower which looks like a winogradowii with stronger constitution. I am sure it will be in great demand.



I. 'Frank Elder' has a blue striping in the standards, bright orange stripe bleeding outwards in the centre of the falls but is otherwise like a bright version of 'Katharine Hodgkin'

If you want a brighter, pale blue flower, with deeper blue lip markings and a yellow central mark on the falls then go for I. 'Sheila Ann Germaney'

Katharine Hodgkin

Frank Elder

Sheila Ann Germaney





Hybrid 02 GH 2



I. Reine Immaculata



I. North Star



Hybrid 03 FQ 1



I. Mars Landing



I. Orange Glow



I. White Caucasus



A wonderful older selection, Iris 'Adijaman' exhibited a kind of shimmering luminosity which is special in many irises and in bird feathers like those of humming birds. Perhaps Neon Tetra fish have it as well!

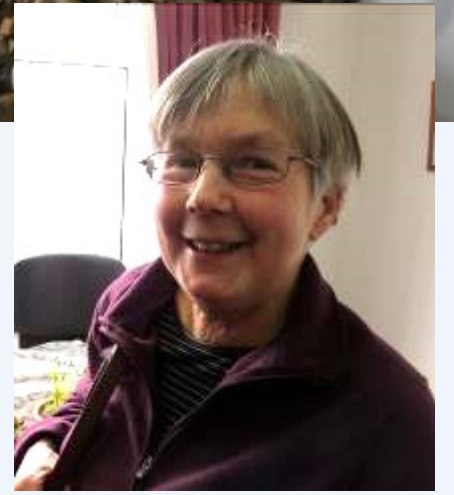


I. "Blue Hill"



Eranthis 'Shwefelglanz' is a pale sulphur flowered selection of winter aconite. The 'petals' on aconites are modified bracts so they can develop to be more or less dissected, just like the true leaves. There is great interest in these flowers in Germany. Below left, is a double flowered selection. Below top right is 'Orange glow' and below it is one of Joe Sharman's selections with green on the reverse of the flower bracts. There is a whole range with varying amounts of green.





Couleurs pour tout
le monde

Thank you Alan for
all your hard work
and for sharing your
hybrids with us in
Scotland

