

The Archibald Archive – Genus Guides

PRIMULA

John Richards' assertion that "Primula is one of the three great garden genera" (his others being Rhododendron and Rosa) betrays an extreme narrowness of vision. The statement requires considerable qualification. Like Rhododendron, it is certainly one of the great garden genera for gardeners in Scotland and northern England. Among comparable herbaceous perennials, gardeners in the southern England or continental Europe might think the genus Geranium to be of much more significance and gardeners in Colorado might do better to consider Penstemon. We have had an intermittent enthusiasm for and involvement with the genus over all our years in gardening in Britain. At the start of his involvement with gardening, Jim worked at Inshriach in Scotland, where Jack Drake maintained and propagated one of the most comprehensive collections of this genus ever assembled.

Primula with well over 400 species, divided into 37 sections and distributed around the northern hemisphere (with an odd disjunction in southern South America) shows considerable diversity and defies sweeping generalization. If one were to be made, it is that the members of this genus almost invariably require cool, moist growing conditions. Like Rhododendron, its centre of diversity is in the mountains of South-west China and the eastern Himalaya, where well over half of the species occur. The remainder is distributed fairly evenly in the other mountainous regions of Asia, Europe and North America. We have no knowledge of the Sino-Himalayan species in the wild but know a wide range of the European, South-west Asian and North American species in nature.

It is some of the Sino-Himalayan species, however, which are important garden plants for us in Wales. We have about 1 hectare (about 2.5 acres) of moist, deciduous woodland and streamside offering the potential for the cultivation of a wide range of species. It is, however, early days in the development of our woodland garden. As we expand the range of species we grow, we hope that fresh, cultivated seeds from an increasing number of species can be made available. We shall obviously start by expanding the range of the ones we can grow with the least trouble, such as those in Sections Proliferae and Sikkimensis, but we might add that we can also arrange very satisfactory conditions for many choicer species, such as those in Section Petiolares. We feel this is an important project as in recent years several Scottish nurseries, which used to be reliable sources of a wide range of primula seeds, have stopped issuing annual seed-lists. So, while the present range listed by us is extremely small and far from representative, we hope to offer an ever-expanding range of cultivated seed to enhance the modest range of collected seeds which we can normally make available.

Nomenclature and Further information: Though many books have been written on this genus, the specialist grower need only consider one. John Richards' monograph 'Primula' is not only an exemplary piece of work but a beautifully illustrated and designed book. First published in 1993, a second edition was published in 2003. There is adequate historical and cultural information on all the known species. When we deviate from the nomenclature used in this, it is usually to follow the regional floras.