

## HOW COULD BRITISH BOTANIC GARDENS HELP THE NURSERY STOCK INDUSTRY IN FINDING NEW PLANTS OF INTEREST?

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One may ask, "why ask the question" and I would state emphatically that there is most certainly a need. Plants of interest are capturing the imagination of many people, both within and outside the nursery stock industry and it is the duty of all concerned to fulfill this need.

Certain members have always known of the great potential and resources of the botanic gardens; however, thoughts were crystallized, appetites whetted and action motivated by the Southeast G.B.&I. Area on a one-day visit to Kew Gardens near London last summer. For many, much of the in-depth work being undertaken was seen at first hand for the first time. The role of the micropropagation unit and its potential as an aid to plant conservation on the one hand, and the rapid bulking of new introductions was just one aspect illustrating the potential of an informed botanical garden (one must admit that here avarice crept into the discussion and could have rapidly taken over). However, I contend that IPPS grower members should be looking at the broader implications and objectives of the nursery stock industry as a whole such as the responsibility of the Industry to preserve and enhance the environment, to conserve our natural flora, both nationally and on a world basis, and to provide a creative and active interest during leisure and recreation periods for the public that we serve. So what can the botanic gardens do — I suggest many things!

a) Plant collection. Expeditions of botanists in the field, looking in depth at particular Regions, Zones, or types of flora, have great opportunities.

b) Positive and accurate identification and naming of plants and the facilities for proving them.

c) The opportunity to display and demonstrate the usage of all plants, to educate and inspire the public to the use of new and unusual plants. (A million visitors pass through Kew Gardens each year).

d) Distribution. The control of introductions and distributions throughout the industry of proven, desirable and valuable material in co-ordination with the established nursery stock industry, thus ensuring the extended usage of a wider range of material, but first to return to:

**The Question.** The need for plants of interest exists, and the ability to maintain an interest in plants and plantsmanship is reaching a wider public. There is, happily, a new generation of young gardeners and, more importantly, young propagators in the nursery industry who are keen on their plants. Specialist nurseries are introducing plants from America, New Zealand, and Japan and a few from the wilds of China! These stalwarts should be encouraged, helped and promoted for there is much still tucked away in as yet unexplored areas and even little known gardens that are worthy of consideration in this context.

I am sure that all plantsmen dread to think of a situation where Garden Centre merchandising, on the basis of turnover per square metre per annum, dominates the nursery stock industry. If this attitude were allowed to take over, the country would be covered in Leyland cypress! Better to foster amongst our gardens the collecting habit and the possible one-up-manship of good garden plants and forms, such forms to be positively identified and recommended by a confident industry. The Long Ashton Clonal Selection Scheme set out to do just this, offering only proven plants; it provides an excellent basis on which to build a wider scheme.

**Plant collections.** Botanists and plantsmen who have knowledge, access, and, in many cases, the time and facility to undertake expeditions could collect for the nursery trade with their specific interests in mind — possibly with some sponsorship from individuals or the industry collectively. What is a new plant of interest? The ability to recognise potential for garden use as well as the necessity to complete collections of flora for the herbarium would be essential.

There is the possibility of the introduction of material to provide a base for breeding programmes. Either *in vitro* cultures or pollen could be used in the controlled environments that are available and frequently used in botanic gardens. Such a programme directed towards specific objectives could possibly produce a blue dahlia or rose, a black orchid or tulip, or any other commercially desirable objective. Whilst one would not advocate the production of garden monstrosities *ad nauseum*, with careful monitoring and control our enthusiastic plant collector could have his appetite fulfilled.

**The naming, proving, and trialing of new plants.** Nomenclature in the nursery stock industry is a grey area with many plants being traded under a wide range of names. A plea for simplification in the system, an acceptance of the correct, authentic botanical name together with a preferred common or commercial name, in addition, could avoid the existing dupli-



cation and confusion which beggars us all. The proving and trialing and identifying of the best forms of either bred or collected plants, with an evaluation on a commercial basis as well as garden merit, would have many advantages in the industry. Consultation between botanic gardens, the nursery stock industry, and other interested parties would be a basis for such proving and trialing.

**Display and demonstrating plant usage.** The setting up of demonstration gardens with regular meetings would help promote plants of interest together with recommendations for their usage. Organised parties and visitors from gardening societies and others particularly interested in plants could be accommodated at regular intervals. Topical demonstrations would become part of the normal day-to-day activity of a public relations staff with the possible participation of the media to give even wider coverage to new activity of interest to the millions of discerning gardeners waiting to soak up such information. Evaluation of appeal of plants could be undertaken in the form of a simple questionnaire, as is currently practised at the Park Floral, Orleans, France, where nurserymen regularly meet to analyse the opinions of the public on the plants they are producing and, as a result of this exchange, the introducer produces what the public wants. I have seen a further extension of this at U.B.C. where a vegetable and herb garden set out on the basis of ethnic groups of the population attracts visitors by appointment who are then told not only about the plants they are viewing, but also their usage within the kitchen. Such a system could be introduced here where plants and their usage in certain aspects of gardening could be dealt with from year to year.

**Distribution.** Having obtained your good plant make the best possible use of it. Distribution could be set up on a joint basis through participating members of the industry. Similarly proven plants could be established in natural collections and freely available registers of such collections produced. One hears tales of choice plants collected in the wild or from chance seedlings or from a breeding programme being distributed and hidden away or possibly lost in little known gardens. It is vital for the industry and for conservation that this loss to all of us must be stopped. New and improved plants should be freely available to all. Is there a role for IPPS in all this? Yes, there most certainly is. We "Seek and Share" our knowledge of propagation; we must communicate and distribute information and generate enthusiasm to ensure that no opportunity is lost. I am hopeful that at the end of today's session we will have resolved to improve relationships with all parties involved in the quest for better plants.