



Islington Gardeners

www.islingtongardeners.org.uk

NEWSLETTER: APRIL – JUNE 2011

In praise of Ferns

Venturing into the garden after the recent snow and freezing cold I was surprised and delighted that the garden had coped and seemed to be getting on with the business of Spring.

What didn't look so well were some of my larger ferns that had been "pancaked" by the weight of snow. Their spire like green fronds lay crushed and broken and were spread out over neighbouring plants in my tightly packed garden. I had firmly to persuade myself that being tidy and cutting back was not a good idea. I had made that mistake with an evergreen fern about four years ago and it has not recovered from the experience. It was only later that I realised how much the plant needs the nutrition these flattened fronds provide. So this time I just rearranged the fronds over the centre of the plant to retain the nutrients and protect the emerging fronds from possible further frosts. Nowadays I do not cut back fern fronds unless they are brown.

Why do I grow ferns? I like their shapes and colours. They like the shade and clay soil of my north east facing garden. They go well with grasses, which I also like, and slugs and snails are not attracted but frogs are. I am also fond of other prehistoric plants like equisetum (horsetail) which look particularly good with *Osmunda regalis* (a very imposing fern with yellow brown "flowers"). If I were focussing specifically on prehistoric plants, I might go for a monkey puzzle tree, but even I realize that might be a step to far for a small garden like mine. Perhaps there is room for a Wollemi pine – I had to be forcibly restrained from purchasing one at the recent RHS show. My equisetum (bog growing kinds which spread readily but are not so invasive as the common one) are currently in pots until the pond gets built. This helps both with restraint and watering in dry periods.

Ferns also mix well with ivies and cyclamen and bulbous woodland plants. There are ferns with beautiful deep red shoots in early spring, others with new growth of flame orange. The variety of form and texture adds interest and beauty to any part of the garden. I'm hopeless at keeping labels so, if a fern struggles in its initial home, I simply dig it up and plant it in another part of the garden and watch and wait. I decided that the *Athyrium niponicum* (Japanese painted fern) is best kept in a pot as in winter dormancy it completely disappears from sight and so is easily disturbed, or even killed, by over enthusiastic gardening. It therefore now it mixes with blue/grey Hostas in a stone area.



Top of my ferny wish list is a tree fern called *Blechnum Nudum* – Fishbone Tree Fern. It looks as if it might be a stunning combination of fern and cactus, which would not be possible in the real world. Australian native, it looks more cactus than fern with fronds the shape of fishbones. If any one sees one please let me know. Joy

Islington in Bloom and Islington Gardeners' own Competition

An entry form for our own members' back gardens competition is enclosed with this newsletter and includes details of this competition. Islington in Bloom entry forms are not yet ready. We will have some available at the Plant Sale and you will, of course, be able to get them from the Council. When we have a soft copy, we will also sent it out to all those with email.

Wildlife: the latest on the Nature Conservation team at the Ecology Centre

Since the last newsletter, efforts via correspondence and at meetings by members of Islington Gardeners, the Wildlife Gardeners, Friends of Gillespie Park, and many other individuals and groups, including MP Jeremy Corbyn, have resulted in relevant Councillors fully understanding what staff members at the Ecology Centre do for the reserves and Islington residents. As a result a further two nature conservation positions (in addition to the two originally announced) are to be retained. In the current financial climate this looks a reasonable outcome, but several nature team staff will still be losing their jobs shortly. There will be a reduction in how much the smaller team can do in the reserves, but the volunteers will continue as before, and there will be a reduced education service. Greenspace hope that the remaining nature team can do as much of everything as possible with significantly reduced resources.

Biodiversity in Islington's parks and open spaces

The debate prompted senior Councillors to think about biodiversity in the Borough, and I was pleased to receive a message from Leader Catherine West stating: "that biodiversity is important and I can assure you it will still be recognised. Indeed councils have a statutory biodiversity duty which is already embedded in our planning documents, and a review of the Local Biodiversity Action Plan will be undertaken to ensure that we are able to continue to meet future requirements."

The Islington Environmental Forum had a discussion on biodiversity in open spaces, and passed a petition to Ms West calling for more encouragement of biodiversity, and the papers can be seen on the IG website in the Library Section.

Subsequently, members of the Islington Wildlife Gardeners' Group have attended a Greenspace Parks and Open Spaces Habitat Action Plan meeting, and Greenspace are planning to build on current progress towards making these green lungs in Islington more biodiversity friendly. Inter alia, they are creating new wildflower meadows in some of Islington's Estates, and we have been promised a bicycling tour of these. If any IG members are interested in joining us, please contact me via Susan@lees.org.uk I am also pleased to report that one IWGG member is busy digging native ransoms out of her garden for planting in Forgotten Corners and the Whittington Park. Hopefully the IWGG can contribute ideas and plants to Greenspace which will help to bring more insects and birds into our parks, to the benefit of people and wildlife.

Out on the land IWGG members have had several workdays in the Archway Cuttings South East, and have created some very fine steps on the steepest part of the path, as well as planting more native wildflowers. Sue

Darwin Trail

An activity for the Easter holidays: take the children to Caledonian Park N7 and around the Darwin Trail, installed last year to link Charles Darwin's ground-breaking evolutionary work to today's environment, and to help us understand the importance of urban ecology, wildlife habitats and biodiversity. Free. For more details see http://www.thegardenclassroom.org.uk/pdfs/Darwin_trail_leaflet.pdf

Arlington Square Community Garden – Exciting new project

Several IG members are helping to develop a community garden in Arlington Square Gardens, N1. In the south western corner of this early Victorian square garden, there is a neglected area that is used as a dumping ground for green and occasionally not so green waste. The local residents' association the Arlington Association have had discussions with LBI Greenspace on how this corner can be put to better use, and it has been agreed that a small community garden can be built where local residents can grow as a community vegetables and herbs in raised beds.

Forgotten Corners

The Rosemary Triangle (outside the Rosemary Branch pub on Baring St N1) is shortly to be replanted by Priscilla Benny, her local Ranger and other volunteers, so please think about making a trip to the Rosemary Branch on a sunny day (or to go to the theatre there), and have a look at the re-done Forgotten Corner in front of the Pub. Meanwhile, here is a picture of the narrow strip of Forgotten Corner at the end of Bingham Street, recovered from a brush with the strimmer gangs and looking good for spring.



Encouraging Bees

The Friends of Gillespie Park invited Dr Fred Clark, beekeeper, to their recent AGM, and he produced a very fine wild bee residence made out of a plastic milk container with the base cut off, and filled with bamboo sticks, to be hung horizontally. Similarly, for winter, a container can be filled with a roll of corrugated paper, hung vertically, again with the base cut off, and the contents secured by a stick pushed through the container horizontally.

Famous naturalist Chris Baines suggests in his (brilliant) book *How to Make a Wildlife Garden* that if you stop mowing the lawn in May, you will get all sorts of small flowers (clovers, dandelions, daisies, speedwells, pink geraniums) which attract insects. You return to a normal mowing regime in mid June. Meanwhile, I have seeded pots with phacelia, a green manure with pretty blue flowers, which is very attractive to bees.

A really useful plant – Hardy Geranium

Although my first hardy geranium, a deep pink sanguineum, came from my mother's garden, this is a plant I always associate with Islington Gardeners' plant sales. It is a popular one to bring along as quite a number of the early ones are in flower by late April/early May and, as we all know, nothing seduces the buyer quite like some pretty flowers **now**. One of my favourite and most successful of these plants was bought from IG half a decade ago and its progeny have made their way back to later sales several times. It is *g. macrorrhizum* Ingwerson's Variety, low growing, spreading, early flowering having palest pink petals and deeper pink sepals.

Another plant sale stalwart is *g. phaeum* Mourning Widow. This is tallish (c. 50cm/20"), has evergreen brown-spotted and occasionally variegated leaves and small maroon-purple flowers. I confess to a lack of enthusiasm for this one. I find it dull. But it is a very good doer, bulking up quickly and self-seeding, which is maybe why it gets to so many sales. I was delighted to discover recently that there is also a white phaeum. I am buying some and hoping it will prove as prolific as the purple. You will know it is if offshoots turn up at sales in a few years' time.

Hardy geraniums do notably well in Islington Gardens. This is probably because they are very tolerant of the kinds of adverse conditions they often find there. Shade, poor soil, dry soil, wet soil – they will rarely give up even where not suited and not managing to do their best. Colour range is white, pink, mauve and blue but within this there is every variation including striped and veined mixes. Some, like Ingwerson's Variety are early flowering and do not repeat, others, including the deservedly popular hybrid Johnson's Blue and tall deep pink black eyed *g.*

psilostemon will flower again if cut back after the first flush. A few, eg *g. sanguineum* and the old *g. x oxianum* “Claridge Druce” can just go on non stop.

Quite a large proportion of the hardy geraniums we grow are native British wildflowers. *G. sanguineum* and *g. phaeum* are both in this category, as are *g. pratense* (meadow cranesbill) and *g. sylvaticum*. Other popular kinds hail from the Pyrenees (*g. endressii*), the Balkans (*g. dalmaticum*) the Caucasus (*g. renardii*) and the Himalayas (*g. himalayense* and *g. wallichianum*). A few, because of very prolific self seeding, are in that half way house between desirable wildflowers and weeds. *G. robertianum* (Herb Robert) is one, and another is a tallish kind with soft grey green foliage and small white flowers which I have not yet identified in my reference books so, although it is almost certainly wild it may not be British or European.

Perhaps rather oddly, the plant breeders do not seem to have moved in on this genus in any big way to deliberately create new hybrids. Indeed, rather than planned crosses, new varieties of hardy geraniums seem generally to arise out of chance cross fertilisation in the wild or in the garden border. One effect of this is that parentage of some popular cultivars is guessed at rather than known. For example, cottage garden stalwart *g. x magnificum* is thought to be *g. platypetalum* x *g. ibericum* but no-one is certain. Another effect is that virtually identical looking chance seedlings can turn up in more than one place. Some of you will have read of a fairly recent names dispute when a plant seeming on sight to be indistinguishable from the very attractive *g. wallichianum* hybrid “Buxton Blue” (late flowering, low growing, clear blue with white eye) was being marketed under another name. Without looking it up, I think the verdict was that, although the plants could be distinguished by the equivalent of a DNA test, the name “Buxton Blue”, having been registered first, should prevail all round.

To further muddy the waters, the species are themselves variable – eg the white *g. phaeum* mentioned earlier. *G. pratense*, mid blue in its most frequently found wild form, has quite a large number of selected colour variations in cultivation, including “Birch Double” (double mauve pink), “Splish Splash” (pale blue with darker blue splashes) and “Galactic” (large white flowers) to name just a few.

GQT had a recent question about what plant collecting obsession might be next after galanthophilia (rare snowdrop collecting). They suggested tree peonies. Lovely as these are, I don’t see them as a runner because few people have gardens large enough to take more than half a dozen, and the Chinese are exporting them to us cheaply and en masse at the moment. But hardy geraniums definitely have obsession potential since even a smallish garden can accommodate a wide ranging collection and, who knows, that chance cross fertilised seedling of yours could be the next sought after rarity. Alison

Gardens to visit by Bus and Train

Many gardeners draw up some kind of planting plan of their gardens, but the version I saw on a visit to Valentines Park in Ilford would provide much cheer as well as reminders, in winter months. It was of the rose garden there, and hung on a wall in the cosy office cum gardening hut of the Parks Manager, Simon Litt. It simply consisted of pretty coloured pictures from catalogues of named individual roses, set out in their borders and beds. An idea easy to copy and I shall hunt for pictures of honeysuckle, phlox and so on to “paint” my borders on a plan.

The rose garden is one element in an estate of 130 acres, and listed in the English Heritage Register of Parks and Gardens of special historic interest. The original house was built in 1696 for the widow of an Archbishop of Canterbury as a country mansion several miles from the edge of London. It has changed hands many times since. It passed into the hands of the local council in the early 1900’s and was used for various purposes until, after a few years of standing empty, it was recently restored by Redbridge Council. Starting in 2007, house and grounds were lovingly and imaginatively restored with the help of Lottery funds and strong local support.

Visitors pass from a busy street through a gate in black railings to see ahead a long canal set in parkland, with, away to the right, a large Georgian house. The so called Long Water, along with other Rococo elements, is the legacy of a City banker who bought the estate in the 1720’s. These include a shallow grotto at each end of the canal, decorated now with only a few large conch shells and starfish of a startling lurid pink. Set back on one bank is the flint Alcove Seat, angled so as to be viewed as though front on from the avenue diagonally opposite across

the Long Water. On that side is the Wilderness, brightened in Spring with a mass planting of Tete-a-Tete daffodils. Hundreds of daffodils also crowd round the boating lake - here mostly Thalia and Jet Fire. The wilderness also features a 250 year old Cedar of Lebanon, almost co-aeval with the house, and an even older field maple, once part of an ancient hedgerow. Beyond this are the southern gardens round the bandstand. These were not too colourful at the time of my early spring visit but will soon be full of ornamental bedding. The scheme for them includes deep blue Salvia Victoria and trailing gold Bidens Aurea "Sunshine".

Walking back towards the house through one of four gnarled hawthorn arches planted in 1870, you come to the Victorian Rose Garden. Around its sides are old fashioned roses including Blush Noisette, Cooper's Burmese, and Souvenir de la Malmaison set over hoops. The centre beds include such as Madame Hardy, Countess of Oxford, William Lobb and Tuscan Superb surrounding an ironwork "Temple". I had to read the labels and imagine. A June visit should find them in their glory. Then pass through a gap in the wall into the Old English Garden. For structure in its long borders, large specimens of Viburnum Bodnantense "Dawn" are used. The box edged beds around a restored Victorian ironwork obelisk, have a range of herbaceous plants for seasonal interest – hellebores, perovskia Blue Spire, yellow achillea, hemerocallis, aster, helianthus, bearded iris. The kitchen garden comes next, with modern raised beds based on sleepers and a delightful 18th century octagonal dovecote. Through a doorway by it you see the nearby restored house, also well worth visiting. In its vestibule I loved the small Regency lantern dome with its delicate glazing bars, and in family rooms the eighteenth century painted panelling.

Details: Valentines Mansion, Emerson Road, Ilford IG1 4XA Tel. 0208 708 8100. www.valentinesmansion.com (official Council site with directions and opening times) and www.valentines.org.uk (Friends of Valentines site with much information about the history of house and gardens and their restoration). Entry is free. Park and gardens open daily 7.30am to dusk, House open Sunday 11am to 4pm, Tuesdays and Wednesdays 10am to 5pm. Refreshments: The Garden Cottage tearoom open daily 10 to 5pm, sells soup and sandwiches as well as delectable cakes. There are benches scattered along the banks of the Long Water which picnickers may use. Travel: nearest station is Gants Hill on the Central Line (Hainault via Newbury Park branch). At Gants Hill station, follow signs saying Cranbrook Road, Valentines. The walk, past Bramley Crescent and Valentines High School, takes about five minutes.

Have You Ever Thought About Opening Your Garden For Charity?

In Islington this summer thirty-one gardens will open for the National Gardens Scheme supporting Macmillan Cancer Support, Marie Curie Cancer Care and several other charities. In 2010, the NGS attracted between 600,000 and 700,000 visits to its gardens and raised nearly £3.3m, with nearly £2.9m of that donated to beneficiaries. Since its foundation, the organisation has distributed more than £35m to good causes. Last year London gardens, including Islington, contributed a net sum of £130,000, and 84% of all the money raised nationally by the NGS goes to its chosen charities. The aim is to increase that figure by fundraising from other sources, such as the charity's core sponsor, the City firm Rensburg Sheppards.

Here are some thoughts from two Islington garden owners who have been opening for the NGS for several years:

Malvern Terrace (opening on Sunday 17th April from 2pm until 5.30pm).

Jill Leman: As there are eleven houses in the terrace, the NGS opening is a sociable afternoon and we have many visitors from near and far. A plant stall offering a wide choice of interesting plants, teas served with delicious home-made cakes, and live music are additional attractions. Visitors say how much they enjoy the gardens, and are amazed at how quiet and peaceful Barnsbury is. I feel it is a very worthwhile fund-raising event and we cross our fingers for a sunny afternoon! Opening as a group feels less pressured than opening on your own, particularly in Islington where the gardens tend to be small, and of course the weather plays a major part in the success of the day.

29 Canonbury Park North (opening on Sunday 10th July from 12 until 4pm).

Jamie Longstaff: The first year in 2009 was a bit nerve-wracking, but I had a fairly good idea of what to expect because my mother has opened her garden in Gloucestershire for many years. By the time we opened on the day, the sun was shining and a small queue had formed which was very encouraging. We had far more visitors than expected, and interesting feedback from everyone about the garden design and planting. In 2010, there were even more visitors. Once again, it was great to have the opportunity to meet other gardeners and even neighbours that

I'd never spoken to before. Many people commented on how interesting it was to see the changes from the previous year as plants were more established. This year we open on the same day as two other fantastic gardens in Canonbury Park North which should be great fun and attract even more visitors. We have made many changes since last year so it will be interesting to hear what our regular visitors think and find out if they have taken any ideas for their own gardens.

This is Jenni Chamberlain's front garden. Her Tuffnell Park garden will be open for NGS in June.



Pros:

- An incentive to get the garden looking its best whilst contributing to charity
- Makes you think more about the layout and structure
- The opportunity to meet other gardeners and neighbours, invite family, friends etc., share ideas and get feedback

Cons:

- Must be prepared to commit well in advance
- There is an element of responsibility to make the effort in preparation of the day

Advice:

- Don't be put off by thinking your garden is too small. Check with the local NGS team
- Get someone to help with admissions and money so you can talk with visitors
- Think carefully when is good to open in terms of plants looking their best, and the weather
- Avoid opening on days when big sporting events are on; eg Wimbledon, golf, football
- Don't panic if the garden doesn't look perfect, eg gaps, plants gone over etc.

Opening can be a challenge and hard work, but for keen gardeners, it is an opportunity to share your enthusiasm whilst contributing to worthwhile charities. If you think you might give it a try, do get in touch with us Gill Evansky and Nell Brown Tel: 020 7359 2484 (Gill) Email: pendarbybrown@blueyonder.co.uk, NGS -Islington

A Book to Enjoy

During the long, dark, dreary days of winter there is lots of time for reading. Most gardeners are supposed to love poring over seed catalogues, but I don't find this terribly exciting – as I don't grow anything from seed (yet). So I would like to recommend a book that I found enjoyable – it is related to gardening issues, but not specifically about gardening as such.

My book is [Sissinghurst - An Unfinished History](#), by Adam Nicolson, the grandson of Vita and Harold. There was a series of TV programmes about the battles of Adam and Sarah Raven with the National Trust about issues concerning the presentation of Sissinghurst to the public – how tidy it should be, what sort of food should be served in the restaurant, etc. – which many people may have seen, but this book is about much more than that. It looks at the history of the landscape in which Sissinghurst Castle is set, the Weald of Kent, and goes back to Celtic times and beyond. It looks at the kinds of trees that were growing at various historic periods, where the rivers flowed, what they were used for, the wildlife of the area and the early human settlements, and gives a fascinating picture of what the English countryside in a particular area was like at various stages throughout the last thousand years or so. It documents our relationship with the landscape around us over a large span of time, and puts the recent conflicts with the National Trust into a much broader perspective. Jenni Chamberlain

If anyone else has read books they think other members of Islington Gardeners would enjoy, it would be very nice to hear from you. Book reviews are especially welcome for the January edition when we are less active outside.

Next Newsletter – early July 2011 – last date for copy 20th June to Alison Barlow, 1 Bingham Street N1 2QQ or alisonbarlow47@aol.com