



Islington Gardeners

www.islingtongardeners.org.uk

NEWSLETTER: JANUARY – MARCH 2011

Armchair Gardening

It is not just the weather but a broken ankle which has been keeping me out of the garden these last couple of months. Since the break happened before all the leaves had fallen or any autumn tidying up had been done, it has all been looking rather unhappy. So, for the sake of a quiet mind and not too many brown patches in the grass next spring, I got someone in with leafblower and rake to shift most of the leaves out of the borders and off the lawn into my leaf mould bin. The rest of the tidying will have to wait for the spring when I should have two whole legs again and there will no longer be the excuse that the litter of damp dead foliage covering rather a lot of the perennials needs to be left in situ to protect them from the frost.

Meanwhile, my main winter gardening activity is the trawling of bulb, plant and seed catalogues for the perfect subjects for corners which have seasonal gaps or just lack shape or colour. This is well known as a seductive occupation, especially seed catalogues. Not only does the picture look beautiful, but for £2.99 I might potentially have 1000 plants. It was a savvy garden guru I heard lately who advised holding back with the initial wish list of seeds and doing some strong minded pruning before putting in the order. I started with a list of nine and think I now have it down to four. Just tall dark blue ageratum like those I saw pictured in a Dutch garden featured in *The Garden*, some lemon yellow calendula, prunella and a dark orange/red rudbeckia. I might even get as far as sowing that little lot rather than adding them to an already large seed packets collection. And, if Islington Gardeners do a spring seed sowing and pruning session again, I can bring the surplus along for a bit of swapping.

Do I need more shrubs? Have I anywhere to put them? I am very taken with a rust red flowered hamamelis mollis which should give a lift around this time of year when colour is predominantly from dark green, yellow or grey evergreen leaves. I need to decide where it might go.

Or bulbs? Diane's piece on nerines (see below) inspires me to try them again after a failure a good few years ago when I think I must have planted them much too deep. There is a dry sunny spot against the wall behind the variegated weigela which is empty after spring narcissi have died down. In principle, it should suit nerines very well. Shall I go for pink or white bowdenii? And will this be the year when I finally get round to ordering camassia and those exquisite little iris histroides Katherine Hodgkin in good time to plant them to flower in season and hopefully naturalise? Alison

Islington Gardeners' own Competition

Time past, before the days of Islington in Bloom, there was the Islington Gardeners' members' garden competition. With cuts announced and more cuts expected to be announced, it is hard to predict the chances that Islington in Bloom will survive in its present form. So now seems a good time to revive our own competition. We don't want to duplicate parts of In Bloom, so the IG competition will be for back gardens. There will be categories related to garden size and additional ones for specific kinds of planting. We thought the latter might include a shady corner or border, a dry garden and a vegetable patch. Suggestions for more categories welcome. Send them to Joy Chamberlin, 14 Campdale Road N7 0EB or joychamberlin@btinternet.com by end February. We would like to get moving on this quickly so that judging can be done in June when gardens should be looking at their best.

Wildlife

We are trying to digest the deeply depressing news that the nature conservation staff at the Islington Ecology Centre are to lose their jobs as a result of one of our new Labour council's decisions on where to make the savings necessitated by reductions in central government funding. In response to initial protests, Councillor Paul Smith (Environment Leader) said the Council were prioritising "our work with those people who are most vulnerable. With our limited funds we are targeting helping those who are going to be most effected (sic) by the government cuts. This choice means that there is simply no money to keep on the staff you are concerned about. I wish this was not the case"

IG have been unable to establish the full details of any of this, and in particular how much the nature conservation service costs in relation to total Council budget and other discretionary services. But we understand that the two conservation wardens, Richard Meyers and Peter Howarth, who know all about the wildlife of the borough and the borough's nature reserves, have had their jobs evaporated. Two people from the Ecology Centre (not the nature conservators) will be transferred to Greenspace; the remaining staff are to go.



We do not know who will maintain Gillespie Park, Islington's flagship nature reserve and a delight to all its users. Will it be turned over to the tender mercies of Greenspace's contractors, who almost always know nothing about plants, never mind insects and birds? Keeping up this haven of 244 plant species, 94 bird species and 24 types of butterfly, etc., does not appear to be one of Councillor Smith's priorities, despite the fact that it has been shown that it is the most disadvantaged individuals who benefit most by contact with nature.

Who will continue the monitoring of species? Without proper records we will not be able to identify, never mind take action to protect, species in decline. We don't know what will happen to the Sparrow Research projects in Laycock Street Park and Whittington Park. Who will lead the Thursday volunteer workdays, so much enjoyed by the participants, when so much valuable work at Gillespie Park and the Parkland Walk, and elsewhere, gets done? Who will do all the outreach and education work for vulnerable people and schoolchildren, showing them the wonders of our natural world - especially valuable for those cooped up in flats? Who will protect our nature around the Borough via the Biodiversity Action Plan (the Biodiversity Officer is also going)?

We lament the departure of the nature conservation team, with whom many of us have had wonderful experiences (looking for bats on the Parkland Walk, identifying wildflowers in Gillespie Park...), we are deeply sorry that their careers are disarranged, and we wish them all the best in the future. We hope that they will stay in touch with us. They have been a comforting part of our community. We will remember them with affection.

If you feel that you cannot bear to remain silent in the face of these particular cuts – and there is more chance of something being salvaged from the wreck if residents kick up a fuss and show Councillors that the nature conservation service has been valued by voters, then PLEASE write to your local Councillors, ideally achieving a spread of Labour and Lib Dem, also write to Councillor Paul Smith (paul.smith@islington.gov.uk) and Leader, Councillor Catherine West (catherine.west@islington.gov.uk).

If you would like to sign up to the Islington Wildlife Gardeners, (no fees, email contacts, all ideas for activities welcomed, especially now....) then please contact Sue Lees: susan@lees.org.uk

Finally: the RSPB Big Garden Birdwatch 2011: this is to take place on the weekend of 29-30 January, spend a happy hour counting the number of each species seen at any one time in your garden or the park, and send your results in via this webpage <http://www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch/>

Forgotten Corners

We do not know how many of the staff at Islington's Greenspace might lose their jobs in the current round of cuts, but we are very aware that IG's Forgotten Corner scheme has had a lot of support over the years from Greenspace and the Rangers, and this department too seems unlikely to be one of Councillor Smith's priorities. We will keep you posted with developments at Greenspace (which of course also deals with Islington in Bloom) as we learn more.

A really useful plant – Nerine

Much as I like spring bulbs, I find it frustrating that I never seem able to get daffodils or tulips established and naturalised to come up every year. No such problem with nerines. I initially discovered them on a visit to Kew many years ago and bought my first bulbs there. I now have several clumps of *Nerine bowdenii* in various large pots and they flower for me without fail every November. I give them minimal attention. I just leave them where they are and wait for them to produce leaves in late summer, followed by tall stems topped with clusters of 8 – 12 iridescent pink lily flowers with long crinkly petals. The shape is rather like sparklers and the cluster is some 3” across. They last for up to 3 weeks and I find them absolutely delightful to look at in autumn/early winter when most other flowers in the garden have already died down.

Nerines are native to South Africa where they grow on rocky ledges and mountainsides in Cape Province. The *Nerine* genus belongs to the Amaryllid family and has some 30 species, of which only *N. bowdenii* is sufficiently hardy to grow outdoors in the UK. Not surprisingly, it is therefore the most readily available and least expensive. Even then, it only qualifies as “moderately hardy” and needs a sheltered spot with sharp drainage. The classic position is in sun at the foot of a wall – which can sometimes conveniently mean they fill a spot too dry for other subjects. As we are also advised that they like to be planted with the bulb neck sticking up out of the soil, a mulch of grit may help outdoor plantings through the winter. Selections of *N. bowdenii* include Fenwick’s Variety (vigorous with large deep pink flowers), Pink Triumph (vigorous silvery pink) and Stephanie (creamy white with a hint of pink). I think the, much reproduced, picture below is Pink Triumph.



The other well known nerine species is *N. sarniensis*, the Guernsey lily (*Sarnia* is an old name for Guernsey). This was the earliest of the genus to reach Europe and is long established in the Channel Islands. Local legend has it that a ship carrying bulbs was wrecked on the Guernsey coast and they were washed up and took root on the shore. Also autumn flowering, it has more varieties of colour and comes in shades ranging from pale pink to vermilion and crimson. But it is less hardy than *N. bowdenii* and, except in the mildest parts of the UK, needs winter protection in a cold greenhouse not getting below 5C. Other tender nerine species found without too much difficulty include *N. undulata* (smaller than *bowdenii* with pale pink flowers) and *N. flexuosa* (white or pale pink). *N. flexuosa* “Alba” is favoured by Beth Chatto in her Essex dry garden but with a proviso that it is only for the most sheltered outdoor spots so I do wonder how it has fared this winter.

Glasshouse nerine bulbs apparently grow best planted in clumps in plastic pots with the plant neck sticking up out of the soil. Planting or re-potting is done in the dormant period between April and August with the pots watered well in late July and then ideally not again until September. Outdoor nerines like mine must take what nature provides and with really good drainage should not be badly affected by summer rain but will definitely flower better if there has been plenty of sun. Flower spikes for both appear in September or October.

For more information and lots of pictures of ever increasing numbers of colourful hybrids visit www.nerineandamaryllidsociety.co.uk or see them in season at RHS Wisley which houses one of the national collections and has more than 500 sarniensis hybrids. Diane A.

Nerine Bulbs to Buy: Nerine bulbs are planted in late spring – and usually take a season to settle. If enough members want to have a go with them, we will put in a joint order to a wholesale bulb supplier for some popular kinds. Provisionally, prices for 12cm bulbs would be: N. bowdenii Stephanie (white) 6 for £5; N. bowdenii Pink Triumph (silvery pink) 5 for £5; N. sarniensis Corusca Major (bright red) 3 for £5. Payment in advance, collection at the Plant Sale. Email islingtongardeners2@hotmail.co.uk if interested saying how many you would want. We will not be ordering unless there are enough takers.

Jo Allain

We were saddened to hear of the death last autumn of Jo Allain, aged 75. Jo, who was a long term resident of this area, first in Canonbury, then in De Beauvoir, was among the early members of Islington Gardeners and a stalwart of our coach trips.

She was notable for involvement in many local activities and was a pioneer of pre-school playgroups. She organised her first, at the Essex Road Guinness Trust flats, as a voluntary group assisted by parents and, when it flourished and was recognised by the authorities Jo received an official council salary. Later, she ran several other playgroups including The New River Play Centre and The Canonbury Nursery.

Many of her interests were theatrical or artistic. In her teens she had joined the WRAF and was very active in RAF theatre shows through which she met her husband John, also in the RAF. Later, while she lived in Canonbury, Jo, with friend and neighbour Maureen Seal, joined the Tower Theatre repertory company and kept up lifelong friendships with those she met there. She also wrote and was a keen and talented amateur watercolourist.

Jo is survived by her daughter Jan, a musician living in Germany, and is greatly missed by many friends.

Transition to a Greener Future

Transition Tufnell Park (TTP) is a new community initiative which aims to follow the example of around 350 other Transition Towns in the UK by spreading awareness and acting locally to encourage a people-led approach to tackling climate change. The key issues are firstly Peak Oil, that is when world production of oil (on which we depend for fuel, transport, plastics, fertilizers etc) starts to fall; many experts believe this is already happening. The second issue is planning for a low carbon future.

The Transition process draws together local people and organisations to address the challenge of climate change. In order to reduce our dependence on oil in all its forms we need to build local resilience and create local economies that can support us in a post-peak oil world. By acting locally, we aim to initiate changes that can lead to the rebirth of local communities which will, for example, grow more of their own food and generate their own power. It's about working together to create a resilient, carbon-neutral community in the face of the inevitable shocks of post-peak oil.

TTP is putting on events such as film screenings, networking evenings and a 'green' pub quiz. Open meetings take place on the second Tuesday in the month at the Tufnell Park Tavern in Tufnell Park Road. There is also a Transition initiative in Highbury, <http://transitionhighbury.ning.com>. For further info on TTP please email: transition-tufnell-park@googlegroups.com, or visit www.projectdirt.com/profile/TransitionTufnellPark. For general info on Transition Towns, www.transitionnetwork.org. Jan Elson

A Love Affair with Hellebore Orientalis

Of all the excitements in the garden now – the sharp scent of sarcococca, the grey spikes of emerging snowdrops and the first sign of pink on the ends of the daphne twigs - there is nothing to beat the fat shiny buds uncurling on Lenten Hellebores (*Hellebore orientalis*). Looking forward to seeing the familiar flowers on old friends is great, but even better is the anticipation of what new seedlings will be like. Gardeners are not short of little miracles (our first success at Brussels sprouts is one) but the diversity of hellebore seedlings is one of the most amazing. In our garden there are several which are completely unlike their parents.

About 15 years ago we bought four hybrids from Ashwood Nurseries in the Midlands, one of the specialist hellebore growers. It was a special offer of mixed types. One is nearly black, one plain pale pink, and two creamy white with plenty of speckles. Then a few years ago an unnoticed seedling under a weigela came into flower. It was quite different from its parents – big flowers, pale, flushed deep pink on the outside of the flower. The pink is deeper on the areas of the petals which were more exposed to the cold, so the outside of the flower is two-tone. Of course, like any other seedling, it is unique, so I immediately named it Hellebore Thornhill, after the square in which we live. We planted another seedling on our allotment in north London, and it went on to produce big plum flowers, with masses of contrasting cream stamens. Again, not at all like its parents. That became H. Barnett. And the same year another seedling planted at the end of the garden became H. Woodland Walk, after our rather grandly named four-yard-long “secret” path.

More and more seedlings came to maturity in the garden, and were given names after daughters and our first grandson. All were slightly different from their parents, but then an extraordinary flower appeared – the like of which I had never seen before, and so very different from its parents. The flowers, technically sepals of course, are cream. The plant is stout, fleshy, and has raspberry coloured nectaries and very distinctive red veining. I named it H. Christopher after my husband, who does not have distinctive veining, fortunately, but could be described as slightly stout. I saw a similar one in a local nursery last year, priced at £10, described as “picotee”. It was so exciting that I used it for a long while as my “photo” on my Facebook page. A friend asked how could I possibly remember which is called which. How could I forget? They are my plant children.



Meanwhile I used to visit Robin Lane Fox’s garden in New College fairly often and was always jealous of his plum hellebores with darker plum speckles. We did not have one like that – but suddenly last year there was another little miracle – a big one appeared at the front of the border with just that colouring. That became H. Wilf after our newest grandson.

In picture: top row H. Oscar, H. Sophie, H. Wilf; middle row H. Thornhill, H. Christopher, H. Paul, H. Woodland Walk; bottom row H. Camilla, H. Dorothy, Unnamed exciting second picotee seedling.

H. orientalis is SO easy to grow – unlike *H. niger* – I have lost count of the number of those I have bought and lost. But *orientalis* is easy. When I plant a seedling I make a bit of effort with the planting hole – some compost, maybe a handful of Growmore. Yet many of the best ones have seeded themselves under shrubs where very little has been done to the soil. The “children” are almost all bigger and sturdier than the original parents. A problem with these hellebores is that once they get quite big – say four or five years old – they are not easy to move. I have

moved a couple, and whilst they are still alive, the leaves are small and they are refusing to flower. Small ones can be moved fairly easily. The only other care they need is to remove scruffy leaves in the autumn so they do not detract from the flowers. The leaves often shelter large numbers of snails which can then be got rid of.

Of course lots of nurseries are breeding extraordinary hellebores now – double, frilled, some almost yellow. I am not sure I am so interested in these doubles and very unusual colours – though I have to admit I will be delighted if something like that appears in the garden.

However one question – it would be great if any member can answer this. H. Camilla, which has been flowering for several years, in the same position, was originally tall and very pale – almost white, exactly like its namesake our eldest daughter. However for the last couple of years just a few very faint speckles have appeared on the sepals. I want to discourage it from that! Any ideas why that should have happened, and what I might do?

Lots more information about hellebores at www.hellebores.org Anna McKane

Bulb Confessions

We all have a bit of an excuse this year for not getting round yet to planting those bulbs bought around September. One does, after all, need to do a bit of clearing of the borders to make space for them, and then, just as the right moment came at the beginning of December, so did the frost and the snow. Too cold to go out gardening, and ground like concrete anyway.

Well, at the time I am writing this, we have neither snow nor frost nor even rain, so, if like me you are one of those with a few bags of crocus, or daffodils or tulips still sitting on the back doorstep or in the shed, there is nothing to stop you from going out and planting them now. They should all still grow, even if they don't flower quite at the time it says on the packet. Tulips are generally a bit more tolerant of late planting than daffodils.

My other confession about bulbs is that there are some kinds of daffodils and narcissi which, after their first year, simply do not grow for me. This is particularly puzzling in places where I have put in a mixed collection and found some kinds have survived and increased while others have just faded away. Is it something to do with the soil in my garden (hungry fast draining gravel), or the way I plant or care for them, or connected with the bulbs themselves. I suspect it is a bit of all three. The only bits of regularly given advice on daffodil care are: plant them deep (a minimum of 8", preferably more, for larger flowered hybrids, minimum 6" for small "rockery" types) if you want them to naturalise; and feed them potash after flowering to encourage the formation of next year's flower buds. I do the potash bit and, having probably failed in the past to plant them deeply enough, am now in to really deep planting. But that doesn't answer the question why in a mixture some do so much better than others. I have long suspected that ideal cultural conditions may vary according to the Division to which a particular hybrid belongs and therefore according to the species which predominates in that Division. However, I have failed to find anything written on this subject. Does anyone know of such a publication?

Meanwhile I would also be interested to hear of other members' experience. Do you, like me fail utterly with *Triandrus narcissi* (eg *Thalia*) and *Tazetta* (eg *Cheerfulness*) but do quite nicely with short cup Division 1 or 2 and with *Poeticus* (eg *Pheasant Eye*) and *Cyclamineus* (eg *Tete a Tete* and *Jack Snipe*). Email me at the address below or at islingtongardeners2@hotmail.co.uk. Alison

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