

## First Quality Plants - Can the Societies Play a Role?

**W. Anthony Lord**

Hardy Plant Society, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire

### INTRODUCTION

This survey aims to specify which societies are possible sources of new or re-introduced plants for the trade, then define quality, and finally discuss how societies can achieve quality in plants, other than those which are already widely available

### SOCIETIES

Specialist plant societies include those which deal with a wide range of plants, such as the Hardy Plant Society (HPS) or Alpine Garden Society; and those covering a narrower range—e.g. the British Fuchsia Society, Delphinium Society, and Royal National Rose Society, for example

Tender plants for outdoor use and woody plants are not well covered by specialist societies although they form a major part of commercial plant sales. Annuals are also poorly covered and development of new cultivars is led by parks departments' requirements for carpet bedding rather than general garden usefulness. Many such annuals are so dwarf that they will scarcely peep above the rim of a window box or other container and will not mix in well with most bed or border planting.

There are also national societies whose interests cover the whole spectrum of garden plants, such as the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS), National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens and National Trust.

The emphasis in this paper is on the amateur societies rather than professional bodies such as I.P.P.S., Institute of Horticulture or Horticultural Trades Association

### QUALITY

Quality, as far as the specialist societies are concerned, is measured by merit as garden plants, whether wild-origin species (or forms thereof), cultivars (including hybrids) or clonal selections. Commercial considerations and marketability are not the primary role of amateur specialist societies

Plant health—freedom from virus, eelworm etc.—also affects quality and societies may be able to play a role in removal of pathogens by modern techniques

### ACHIEVING BETTER PLANTS

Societies dealing with one genus, such as the Delphinium Society, have long been involved with selection and breeding of new plants but breeding of most genera has not been actively encouraged by societies with a wider remit in recent years. The Hardy Plant Society plant breeding subcommittee was recently started with the aim of encouraging members, amateur and professional, to try simple plant breeding or at least to select good forms from mixed ranges of plants or recognise valuable mutations and self-sown seedlings. The subcommittee hopes to “demystify” plant breeding and also to assist in the naming, registration and marketing of new plants on behalf of its members. Worldwide HPS membership helps in acquiring seed of possible parents. This is particularly valuable for genera

such as *Phlox*, which have tremendous untapped potential as herbaceous plants, cut flowers and even pot plants, but for which many of the most promising species are not in cultivation in Europe or the British Isles.

The Hardy Plant Society Search List was originally started as a means of seeking out old plants of historic or conservation importance. It seems a waste of effort to scour the world for a restricted range of plants, some of which must by now be superseded, and not to use the same list and importation system to import other plants of interest to HPS members including new cultivars, so plants other than those of conservation value have been added to the Search List. Establishing contacts for export/import is crucial and difficult. Bulking up and distribution of newly introduced plants is another important step: a distribution system which is seen to be equitable to all members, including nursery owners, is essential.

Assessing quality and distinctness especially of new plants is aided by collections, including the National Collections scheme of the National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens. Trials, particularly those organised by the RHS, are also very helpful. However, the RHS trials have had their limitations in the past: they have only proved whether plants will perform well in the trials field at Wisley, in conditions that are not necessarily ideal for the particular plants; they do not show how the plants will perform in other parts of the country; there is a limit to the number of trials the RHS can run and it is difficult to acquire the full range of plants for each trial; once the trial is complete and the best sorts have been given awards, it is not necessarily easy for gardeners or nurseries to acquire stock.

The RHS is very actively trying to improve its trials system. Extending trials to Rosemoor and Pershore in the West and possibly Harlow Carr in the North would make it much more likely that plants can be grown in the climate that suits them best as well as telling us more about hardiness. Specialist societies might be able to help make plants from trials more widely available. Publication of information about good plants, new or old, including those from trials or National Collections is useful in making known which ones are most garden-worthy.

Clonal selection is unlikely to be within the interests or capabilities of individual society members but societies can identify a need for selection and encourage suitable bodies to take on the task, perhaps linked to National Collections or trials.

Improving plant health by meristem culture or heat treatment is an expensive process, beyond the means of most societies unless costs can be covered by the sale of healthy plants. The HPS project with double sweet rocket was an early venture and proved very successful; the society is considering which other plants should be cultured next.

*The Plant Finder*, published annually in association with the HPS, enables plant users to be much less approximate in their choice of plants and to select and buy the cultivar or species which is best for a particular purpose, not just the one that happens to be most easily available. Through the *Plant Finder*, quality plants will quickly come to the attention of a wide market, even if they are initially scarce and little known.

## CONCLUSION

Societies can certainly play a useful role in breeding, selection and introduction of quality plants. They may also be instrumental in improving plant health, at least for more popular and commercial types.

Their success depends on vigorous and active membership, preferably with a good balance of amateurs and professionals, and good communications within the society—for larger societies, an effective group structure helps. Societies with overseas membership are more able to achieve results. There is much scope for society involvement to improve the range of all sorts of garden plants, although there is comparatively little specialist society interest in trees, shrubs, tender plants and annuals. The specialist skills of I.P.P.S. members would enable them to do much within societies such as HPS and NCCPG to improve the quality as well as increasing the quantity of the finest garden plants.

Membership of HPS currently costs £8.50 single/£10.00 joint from the Membership Secretary, Mr S.M. Wills, The Manor House, Walton-in-Gordano, Clevedon, Avon BS21 7AN. Details of membership of NCCPG are available from the General Secretary, R.A.W. Lowe, NCCPG, Royal Horticultural Society's Garden, Wisley, Woking, Surrey, GU23 6QB.