

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE CONSERVATION OF PLANTS AND GARDENS IN RELATION TO THE IPPS

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In horticulture, awareness of plant conservation has been evident for many years by many individuals and organizations. The National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens (NCCPG) has been in the vanguard of this movement and is the only organization that embraces the professional and amateur sectors with equal confidence. Increased collaboration between it and nurserymen could be mutually beneficial.

A conference, convened by the Royal Horticultural Society in October, 1978, proposed the formation of a National Gardens and Plants Council and put forward the idea of national reference collections (now known as National Collections), (1). Interested parties identified at that time included botanic gardens, arboreta and other similar gardens, National Trust gardens, parks and other gardens of local authorities, nurseries, specialist societies, state research and other establishments, educational establishments, private gardens and small groups within horticultural societies.

The role of the IPPS as an interested professional body was mentioned where it was recognized that "the expertise to propagate many rare and threatened plants was available in the IPPS."

At the inaugural Conference it was felt that rare and threatened plants in cultivation could be divided into two groups, those threatened with extinction in the wild, and those threatened with extinction within gardens (1). Within this context five categories were considered to be important, viz: (1) historically important hybrids; (2) genetically important hybrids; (3) unusual cultivars of fruit, ornamentals, and vegetables; (4) species or variants now in cultivation but where stocks in the wild no longer exist, (5) species and variants known to be rare in the wild.

The NCCPG was, in effect, born at this meeting. It was registered as an independent charity and based at the RHS Garden, Wisley, Surrey.

The strength of the organization lies in its membership, based on 39 autonomous, county-based groups, currently totalling 8,500 members.

The National Collections of genera form the key to active conservation. These are comprehensive reference collections maintained by private members or corporate bodies (5).

Initially a number of rather arbitrary guidelines had to be drawn. For example, when was a plant considered to be endangered? Here nursery catalogues were found to be of considerable value. Where plants were listed by three or fewer nurseries then the plant was considered at risk of being lost to cultivation (2, 3).

Which endangered plants should be conserved? Obviously, it is impractical to attempt to conserve everything because of a lack of space, time, and funds.

The importance of maintaining genera with medicinal qualities such as *Salix* (which yields aspirin), *Digitalis* (the source of a heart stimulant, digitalin), *Catharanthus* (used in the fight against cancer) and, more recently, *Linum* (currently being investigated by the University of Nottingham for its anti-cancer properties) are examples.

In order to assess priorities Lowe (3) proposed four main guidelines in assessing a plant's merits with regard to conservation. These were: its use to man; its historical importance; its scientific uses, and aesthetic value.

Many of the plants at risk have now been incorporated within National Collections. Here conserved stocks are maintained by various groups, including nurserymen.

As the collections grow and mature so their value for reference purposes and as a source of known stock material increases. Accurate naming has been found to be one of the greatest problems. For this reason herbarium and slide collections are being built up at the headquarters at Wisley, as are computer-based databases.

By 1989 there were 503 National Collections, with 50 more being approved each year and this pace is quickening rather than slowing.

Since 1981 membership has risen from a few enthusiasts in one county (Dorset) to the current strength of 8,500—an enormous jump by any standards.

The provision of accurately known reference material for medical research is particularly important. Similarly the reference collections (both living and as herbarium specimens) form a base for the taxonomic and botanical research of cultivated plants.

However, conservation is active, not passive, and it is the involvement of the producer or the grower (whether for pleasure or profit) that will, in the long term, reflect the degree of success of the venture.

THE VALUE OF THE NCCPG TO THE IPPS

Not surprisingly the relations between the NCCPG and nurserymen have been extremely good; 14% of the National Collections are held by nurserymen while several of the colleges hold collections which are of value as teaching aids (examples being Somerset College, Cannington, with *Abutilon*, *Ceanothus*, and *Wisteria*; Merrist Wood,

Surrey, with *Cotoneaster*, *Euonymus fortunei*, and *E. japonicus* cvs.; Hadlow in Kent, with *Enkianthus* and *Pernettya*; and Writtle in Essex with *Pyracantha*).

Examples within the nursery industry are Notcutts Nurseries, which hold 24 taxa of *Hibiscus syriacus*; Webbs Nurseries with 30 taxa of *Forsythia* and *Potentilla*; Glendoick Gardens with *Kalmia* and *Enkianthus*, Secretts Garden Centre with *Cornus florida* and a *Kalmia latifolia* collection; Goldbrook Plants with *Elaeagnus*; The Knoll Gardens, Stapehill, with *Mahonia*; and Tavistock Woodlands with *Nothofagus*.

Within the public sector, Leeds Parks holds a number of collections; Brighton Parks hold an internationally registered *Syringa* collection; Torbay Parks, *Abelia*, *Carya*, and *Jasminum*; Plymouth, *Camellia*; Derby City Council, *Hydrangea*; and The Hillier Arboretum, *Carpinus*, *Cornus*, *Corylus*, *Cotoneaster*, *Ligustrum*, and *Quercus*.

The collections are a ready source of material available to the nurseryman. It is hoped that where nurseries are in difficulty with particular plants, they might well be able to purchase limited propagation material from such sources. Such arrangements would seem appropriate as individuals hold and maintain these collections on a voluntary basis.

Besides providing a network of accurately named stock sources the NCCPG may also look to the IPPS membership for expertise at various times. Pattison (4) in assessing the reasons why garden plants survive or fail listed four major contributors to loss: Propagation difficulties; disease; genetic instability (many new cultivars may not be as stable as their parents and where plants have been propagated vegetatively for centuries stocks may be weakening); and fashion.

A number of factors contribute towards the importance to the nursery trade of the NCCPG. Amongst these are: the current upsurge in interest in conservation at national and international levels; the interest from the gardening public and hence the garden centres in 'new' or 'novel' plants; and the withdrawal of interest (and funding) of government-sponsored research at this level in the U.K.

Thus the opportunity exists for nurseryment to take advantage of the rich collections of genetically known material that are being collected. Purchase of known stock of older, rare or existing (but difficult) plants may at times be commercially advantageous.

Obviously an even more positive step would be for the nursery concerned to take an even greater interest in the particular plants in question and to develop, where appropriate, a National Collection.

Thus there is a unique opportunity for the IPPS, particularly within the U.K. and Europe, to work with the NCCPG in retaining a broad base of genetic material. Such a role could be financially stimulating and mutually interesting. The opportunity for such a cooperative venture should not be missed.

Note: A list of plants and their locations can be obtained from the NCCPG, R.H.S. Gardens, Wisely, Surrey, U.K.

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