

## Geek to Gardener and back again - the story of a “journey” with the SRGC by Alan Elliott

My mum reminded me recently I once asked her if I should be an astronomer or a gardener. She pragmatically told me I could be an astronomer who gardened or a gardener who looked at the stars. I should have listened, but instead in 2000 I left school and went to do Computer Games Technology. After three and a half years I decided it really wasn't for me.

I got more hours at the Co-op superstore in Forfar where I already worked part-time and ended up in the garden centre. I enjoyed working in the garden centre mostly because on pension day was like working in a toyshop full of excited children; so I decided to get some horticultural training.

With the money I saved working I went to New Zealand, Fiji and Vancouver. I visited as many gardens as I could, including: Wellington and Christchurch Botanic Gardens in NZ; in Fiji the National Botanic Garden and the Garden of the Sleeping Giant, which was the personal orchid collection of Raymond Burr of 'Ironside' fame and then in Vancouver the University of British Columbia Botanic Garden, Nitobe, a Japanese tea and stroll garden and the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden in Vancouver's Chinatown. All of which were very inspiring.



*Droni Amcho, a student of Tibetan Medicine and another SRGC Grant recipient, with Alan Elliott at the SRGC Annual General Meeting in 2010, when they both gave presentations.*

Once back in Scotland I started my horticultural training at Angus College in Arbroath doing the National Certificate in Amenity Horticulture in 2004/5. I then went to Elmwood in Cupar, Fife to study for the Higher National Certificate in Horticulture during 2005/6, receiving an award from the Institute of Horticulture for best horticulture student. During the year at Elmwood I was encouraged to get some practical experience and did two days a week at NTS Branklyn Garden in Perth.

At Branklyn I was thoroughly indoctrinated into alpines through the enthusiasm of Steve McNamara, Ed Stone and Boyd Barr. My first job was pulling moss from the *Raoulia haastii*, a definite first for me. I was then handed some polish and a yellow duster and sent to the *Prunus serrula*. When I started to walk off I heard laughter

behind me – I assumed it was a rite of passage and no it didn't actually get polished. I really enjoyed my time at Branklyn as it was where I was introduced to *Meconopsis* and the SRGC!

The Elmwood lecturers and the guys at Branklyn encouraged me to go to Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh to study for a degree in Horticulture with Plantsmanship. I started in 2006 joining the 2<sup>nd</sup> year (Higher National Diploma level) of the course. The SRGC kindly supported me through the year with a very generous Diana Aitchison grant which made my life much simpler. For my 2<sup>nd</sup> year project I was awarded an International Plant Propagators Society prize for my *Meconopsis* seed germination trial. I completed the degree in 2009 achieving a First Class Honours and was also awarded the best dissertation for my study looking at seed germination and seed coat morphology in the context of the genetic relationships within *Meconopsis*. The dissertation and other smaller *Meconopsis* projects would not have been so successful without the support of the Meconopsis Group.

I took full advantage of my time as a student at RBGE. I spent the summer of 2007 in Istanbul at the [Nezahat Gökyiğit Botanik Bahçesi \(NGBB\)](#). It was an amazing experience working in a horticultural environment very different to Scotland. The SRGC through Diana Aitchison helped cover living expense for myself and another RBGE student while there. We made ourselves useful by repotting 2500 pots of Turkish native bulbs, helped develop various parts of the garden and watered everything in sight - including ourselves. The following spring I went back to NGBB as a horticultural technician to help deliver the RBGE Certificate of Practical Horticulture to staff. I spent the summers of 2008 & 2009 working in the Plant Records office mapping 1500+ trees and 2000+ Rhododendrons at both Inverleith and Benmore to tie the digital map into the Garden's database.



An ambition of mine to visit the Himalaya was realised when I was awarded a Merlin Trust grant to join the AGS trip to Bhutan in 2009. I very cheekily skipped the viva for my dissertation and missed the graduation ceremony in favour of going to the Himalaya. It did mean that I had no idea if I'd passed any exams let alone graduated until I was back in Heathrow! The images I took in Bhutan were later awarded the Valerie Finnis prize and can be seen at <http://www.merlin-trust.org.uk/gallery.html>

I spent the next two years working in the RBGE herbarium on the Global Type Initiative. I worked with the Type specimens of plants from the Indian subcontinent, the Himalaya and S.E. Asia. This meant I got handle plant specimens collected by legendary plant collectors such as George Forrest, Joseph Rock, Frank Kingdon-Ward and Frank Ludlow & George Sherriff, as well as many others, on a daily basis! A side project while doing that job was researching Roland Edgar Cooper and the biographical note I've written should be in the January 2013 *Rock Garden*. One day a week I was moved to a small project identifying wild collected plants growing in the Living Collection that did not have a name. Collaborating with various members of the Science and Horticulture staff we identified over 536 plants from 172 accessions. Importantly, this added 39 new taxa to the Living Collection never grown at RBGE before.



A chat in the canteen at RBGE during those two years ended up with a vague plan to have me do a PhD for the Flora of Nepal Project. Eighteen months later, in September 2011 I started and I am now in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of my project funded by the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) at Edinburgh University but based at RBGE. I am looking at the dynamic of speciation in the Himalaya. The project is using genetics to look the relationships between species, patterns in the geography and timing speciation events using fossils for a number of different genera. All this has to be then tied in with the geologic history of the Himalaya. Yes, it is as daunting as it sounds. The SRGC's Exploration Fund and the Davis Expedition Fund administered by Edinburgh University helped fund my participation in the multinational expedition to Darchula in the Far-West of Nepal during summer 2012. (see Alan's Report [here](#))

I've also done some teaching and demonstrating at RBGE putting the skills and knowledge I've gained to good use. I taught the short Beginning Botany course in 2011/12, have done two one day *Meconopsis* Workshops, and demonstrated on various parts of the Certificate of Practical Horticulture, at RBGE and NGBB. This year I am supervising an undergraduate project looking at climate change in Scottish Gardens and another for the Flora of Nepal looking at *Nepeta*.

I really can't thank the SRGC enough for supporting what I do and getting me to where I am. As well as a massive collective thank you to the entire SRGC; I should thank some individual members who have been instrumental in my professional development (in alphabetical order so there is no hint of favouritism): Boyd Barr, Ian Christie, James Cobb, Julia Corden, Elspeth Mackintosh, Steve McNamara, John Mitchell, David Rankin, Evelyn Stevens and David & Margaret Thorne.

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Note:

2013 is the 100th anniversary of Roland Edgar Cooper heading off on his first collection trip to Sikkim on behalf of A.K. Bulley and also the 80th birthday of the SRGC : Cooper was one of the founding members of the SRGC. In "The Rock Garden" #130, January 2013, Alan writes on R. E. Cooper, "A Founder Member" - [click here](#) to read that article.

The RBGEdinburgh are putting on a small exhibition of Cooper's archive material outside the Library between the 7th May – 26th July 2013. The exhibition will have Cooper's maps from Bhutan, Sikkim and N.W. India from his collection trips for Bulley between 1913 and 1916, journals, specimens and images etc. on display.