



FEBRUARY may be the shortest month, but it doesn't always feel that way when to open the door to the garden is to invite in an icy blast of sleety rain. By the end of the month the first of the snowdrops may be braving the wintry conditions, but it will be March before these are blooming in sufficient numbers to raise the spirits.

Yet step through the door of the Victoria Halls in Dunblane on Feb 16 from 10am-2pm (admission free) and it will be as if the seasons had already shifted.

Here you will find not just snowdrops in infinite variety, but a host of other cheerful flowers, filling the air with the sweet scent of spring. This is the annual Early Bulb Display of the Scottish Rock Garden Club, an organisation which this year celebrates a significant landmark.

It is 80 years since a group of alpine plant enthusiasts gathered in the Rutland Bar at the western end of Princes Street in Edinburgh and, over a dram, laid the foundations for what would become the largest horticultural

club in Scotland and one with a worldwide membership.

Today there are Scottish Rock Garden Club members in 38 countries and the highly active online Forum on the Club's popular website thrums with the chat of enthusiasts in Ayr and Australia, Dundee and Dunedin, Norway and Norfolk, exchanging stories of bulbs and blooms and growing conditions in their own back yards.

Long-time SRGC member, Sandy Leven from Dunblane says, "The Scottish Rock Garden Club is peculiarly Scottish. It was formed at a time when there was a huge number of new introductions by plant hunters and it was recognised that because of our geography and range of climate zones, plants from temperate regions around the world could thrive in Scotland."

From the outset, the SRGC was open to anyone who shared a love of rock garden plants and today it is still true to its egalitarian beginnings, counting amongst its members botanists, professional growers,

knowledgeable amateurs and absolute beginners. Many of them would acknowledge that they share a love of rock gardening that borders on obsession.

Nurseryman Ian Christie from Kirriemuir is one of this country's leading alpine plant experts. He says, "There are alpine plants suitable for anyone, from beginners to experienced growers and gardeners can easily get hooked on them because there is such a wide range available."

One of the ways in which the SRGC helps to make alpine plants more widely available is through its annual Seed Exchange when members throughout the world contribute seed collected either from their own plant collections or from the wild in order to make it available to other members.

The SRGC's plant list extends to more than 5,300 species,

most of them unavailable from any other source and throughout January and February every year a team of 30 volunteers packs and labels 60,000 seed packets and sends them off to members around the world.

SRGC member Ellen McBride says, "In the early days of the Club it was seen as quite acceptable to remove rare plants from their natural habitat. In recent decades this practice has diminished due to changes in the law and a greater awareness of the value of conservation. Today Club members still travel the world looking for rarities but now they record them with digital cameras instead of collecting the actual plant and the SRGC Journal records many plant hunting expeditions."

Rock garden plants come from the world's highest places, from its rocky cliffs and scree slopes, and they thrive in conditions where little else can survive.

The Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh has what is reckoned to be one of the world's greatest Rock Gardens and at the moment it is putting the finishing touches to a new Alpine House, which will protect some of its more vulnerable species from the Scottish elements.

This year, to mark their anniversary, the SRGC also has plans to create a large rock garden exhibit at Gardening Scotland 2013 and it has an on-going programme of Bursaries and Funds that assists in the study of alpine plants around the world.

Sandy Leven says that as the Club reaches its 80th anniversary it needs to look in two directions, "forward to the challenges of new technology but also back to ensure that we maintain all that

is good about the Club – participation, friendship and sharing knowledge."

And Ian Christie, himself a former

President, is confident that it will continue to flourish.

"I always say that the SRGC is like a big family spread around the world. Every member is passionate about plants and willing to share their knowledge and friendship."

