Among the Orchidaceae, Orchis is one of my favourite genera. In particular a clone of *Orchis Italica* has performed well for me. It starts into growth very early and the leaves appear at the beginning of September. Leaf growth is quite rapid and at the end of October the leaves are already well developed. It flowers early in the spring and was just right for the Stirling show in 2003 when it was judged best in show. It had also previously been awarded an A.M.
Growing for Showing

The Clark Memorial Lecture

Cyril Lafong

I grow alpines to admire their beauty and to increase my knowledge of these small hardy plants that come from all over the world. It is an intense, absorbing and serious interest, but I have to mention right from the start that I do not grow solely or primarily for showing. Showing is for me a natural progression to growing plants well and is the ideal forum to share the love of plants with like-minded fellow members.

We spend hours preparing our plants for the show. We pack them into the car, get up at 5 a.m. on the day, drive for hours to the show venue, stage the plants, wait until 4.30 p.m. to collect the plants and drive the long way back home. Why do we do this? I put that question to Ian Young, the Aberdeen Show Secretary, one cold, wet, windy morning as I was coming in the hall with my third tray of plants. “Because we love it” was his simple answer and how true that was. There is no obligation on us to do this. Exhibiting may seem a bit insane to other less enthusiastic members but it is very enjoyable and can even become a bit compulsive.

Shows allow us to see an amazing variety of alpine plants together, plants that most of us will not get an opportunity to see in the wild. We can meet friends with whom we share a common interest and discuss the plants’ cultivation and attributes. We can exchange seeds, cuttings and plants that would otherwise be very difficult to obtain. There are plants on sale from Club sales and nursery stands and there is a small amount of prize money although this is derisory and certainly not an enticement for showing. Shows are also an important and effective shop window to advertise the activities of the club and are
of vital importance for recruiting new members.

If there are any would-be exhibitors thinking about starting to show, I hope to be able to convince you to take the plunge and become hooked by the bug of showing. It may seem a little daunting at first but ultimately it is a very enriching experience.

When I moved to Scotland in 1987, I attended all the SRGC spring shows and was impressed by the variety of plants on display and the quality of some of the exhibits. It was not until 1995, ten years after I started growing alpines, that I began showing. Before I began showing I wanted to grow the plants well. You do not, however, need to wait for 10 years like I did before showing. Most beginners should be able to exhibit in section 2 after a year or two although there is no reason why they could not exhibit in the open section if they have good plants. The plants do not have to be very large or be of a certain age; the only pre-requisite being that the plant needs to be in their possession for at least 6 months.

**Beginning with alpines**

I have always been interested in growing plants. When we got our first house in Belfast in 1980, there was a moderate size garden and I started growing a few vegetables and fruits. My interest in alpines started in 1985 when I bought a packet of mixed alpine seeds from Bees seed company. There were 6 different types of seeds of easy plants such as aubrieta, alyssum and arabis and these grew and flowered well for me. This encouraged me to try a variety of other colourful rock garden plants. I bought my first greenhouse 8’ x 6’ at the beginning of 1987 but later that year had to move to Scotland to start a new job. The buyer of our house was not interested in gardening and rather than leaving the greenhouse for which I have paid good money, I decided to take it down and bring it with me to Scotland as I was getting my removal expenses paid for.

I re-erected the greenhouse and there were only 2 panes of broken glass that needed replacement. Soon there was not enough room and I decided to add a bigger greenhouse 12’ x 8’. I was growing
These are the two greenhouses in spring 1992, four years after we moved to Scotland. I was not growing any bulbs then and there was a lot of ground to grow alpines. I grew many of the typical colourful alpines such as campanula, erodium, gentiana, and phlox. I was especially keen on lewisias and grew as many species and varieties as I could acquire.

The large greenhouse has been added since then and in here plants are grown in clay pots plunged in sand.

The bench staging is 9" deep making it useful for big and for deep pots.
There are many advantages in having an alpine house – plants need attention in all weathers and the staging brings plants closer to eye level so that they can be cared for and admired more easily.

An alpine house is not essential - plants can be grown in frames and I have acquired a few 'Access' frames.
all types of alpines in plastic pots. I still grow and show many plants and dwarf bulbs in plastic pots although I sometimes plunge them in clay pots to enhance their appearance. There are different types of plastic pots on the market and some are more acceptable than others. The orange ones are not much liked by judges but black or dark-green or clay look-alikes are quite reasonable. There is no reason why plants such as cyclamen or foliage plants cannot be shown in plastic pots. I have grown *Trillium rivale* and *Lewisia leana ‘Alba’* (and many others) in plastic pots for years and shown these on several occasions.

Most plants, however, are easier to manage in clay pots and I decided to get a ‘proper’ greenhouse or ‘alpine house’ to provide the right conditions for the plants to grow. In the large greenhouse which is 20’ x 12’, plants are grown in clay pots plunged in sand in aluminium staging. One of my ultimate gardening heights is to grow alpines well. I believe that plants are not worth growing unless they are grown well and I grow plants trying to achieve their full horticultural potential, aiming for excellence and perfection. My interests have changed over the years but I still grow a wide range of alpines although I am especially interested in a few genera such as *Androsace*, *Fritillaria*, *Corydalis*, *Daphne* and *Iris*. I am always trying new plants. There are now so many expeditions and seed collections and there have been so many new introductions in recent years.

There are many advantages in having an alpine house. In winter and early spring when there is much activity going on, the weather can sometimes be very unpleasant and an alpine house can offer protection to the plants and the gardener. Plants need attention in all weathers and the staging brings plants closer to eye level so that they can be cared for and admired more easily.

**Other growing situations**

An alpine house is desirable but not essential to grow alpine plants. Many of the best growers do without them. Plants can be grown in frames or covered raised beds or plunged in the open garden and only covered in winter or before flowering. The advantage is that plants
stay in character and not drawn as sometimes happen in the alpine house. Some plants such as *Androsace mucronifolia* and *A. alpina* should be grown outside and only brought in the greenhouse for flowering. I needed the ‘hardware’ to grow a wide variety of plants. As well as the greenhouse I also acquired a few ‘Access’ frames. I grow many bulbs in lattice pots plunged outside on a raised bed. These can then be lifted and sunk into a clay pot for showing. Lattice pots can also be used in the bulb frame where they take little space.

**Winter protection**

I find that a small amount of heat in the alpine house, just enough to provide frost protection during prolonged cold spells is not only beneficial but also necessary. In the winter of 1996, when temperatures in parts of Scotland reached –20°C for several days, many people lost plants that were frozen solid for days and were not able to absorb water. Plants in active growth especially bulbs were particularly vulnerable. With a little heat, my losses were minimal during that winter. I use a fan heater that keeps the atmosphere buoyant by moving the air around. Running costs can be very low if the heater is only used when absolutely necessary.

**Ventilation**

One of the most important aspects of growing alpines is maximum ventilation provided by open doors, vents, louvres and fans. I leave these open in all but the severest weathers. An open door at each end of the greenhouse is a distinct advantage as it allows the air to flow through. Fans come on and off every 15 minutes throughout the year. The top of the plunge should ideally be level with the bottom of the louvres, which are preferable to vents as they allow a greater volume of air through.

**Shading**

The greenhouse and frames should ideally be in an open situation to receive maximum light. When we first moved to Scotland, we were
lucky if the temperature in the summer reached 17°C. However, the summers are getting hotter and after this year’s record temperatures, I have no doubt that shading is essential during the summer months even in Scotland. The temperature reached 28°C on several occasions this August and on many evenings the temperature was 20°C when I went to bed. A few plants in the greenhouse have been scorched this year. Up until now I have not been shading my greenhouse, but from next year from June to August, I shall be putting white netting on the outside of all the greenhouses and frames. So far, I have moved particularly susceptible plants to a shaded spot, either on the floor of the greenhouse or outside. Blinds, or slats such as those used in the Royal Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh, are an effective way to provide shading. Another alternative is to use coolglass (colour wash) on the outside.

Starting growing

I sow between 200-300 seed pots every year. These come from my own seeds, from the alpine societies or from commercial seed producers and collectors. I also buy plants from nurserymen and there are exchanges of seeds, cuttings and plants that take place every year with fellow members. Seeds, however, are the source of the majority of my plants.

After sowing, the pots are placed in a shaded frame to protect them from excessive rain but space is always short and many pots are left outside totally unprotected. They are only brought in the greenhouse after germination to give the seedlings plenty of light and to keep them frost-free so they can grow away without any check. Damping off can sometimes be a problem especially if the seeds have been sown too thickly. I apply a solution of liquid copper fungicide to susceptible seedlings as soon as germination takes place. I do not rush to prick the seedlings, leaving them to get a good root system before doing so.

Seedlings are pricked into 2” pots when large enough to handle. I grow as many seedlings as possible and select the best ones to grow on
CUSHION PLANTS

Cushion plants make ideal plants for the show bench. It is possible to achieve a degree of perfection difficult to achieve in other plants. Many people admire their symmetry and compactness and some plants can literally cover themselves with flowers so that no foliage is visible. Many come from high up on the mountains and are regarded as 'proper' alpines by many enthusiasts. Androsace is one of my favourite genera. *Androsace hirtella* (13) is very floriferous when well grown but the true species is not common as many plants in circulation are hybrids with *A. cylindrica* or other species. These hybrids are also good plants to grow. *A. vandelli* should preferably be grown in the alpine house all year round. It can be grown outside in a sheltered spot with overhand protection but does not flower so profusely. In the alpine house, it flowers reliably and will cover itself with flowers in most years.

*Alkanna sieheana* (14) was grown from seed from J&J Archibald collected in 1994. It is considered as the 'turkish Erlicheium'. Alkanna is a genus that includes plants that can be quite shrubby but this is more like a cushion. If grown from seeds, plants are very variable. *A. sieheana* is close to *A. arschetiana* but with greener leaves and deeper blue flowers although the colour can be variable. The selection I named 'Royal Blue' was awarded an A.M. The plant needs a good 'haircut' after flowering to keep it bushy.

*Lamium microphyllum* (15) could pass for a cushion plant as it makes a compact mat of small green leaves. In spring, over a long period, it produces a succession of flowers that individually do not last but at its peak, the plant makes a wonderful pan. It was awarded an A.M.
in plastic pots. I repot regularly as necessary, keeping them free from pests. The very best are then grown in clay pots from 4” diameter onwards and plunged where they can be looked after more closely. Some are grown in plastic pots throughout. Bulb seedlings are left in their pots for 2 years before repotting.

Pests

Aphids have to be watched for in all weathers. I use liquid derris or ‘Provado’ but there are many other insecticides on the market and it is a good idea to rotate different types to prevent resistance building up. I have had severe problems with red spider mites due to the hot dry summers in recent years. Preventive measures, e.g. moving susceptible plants such as Androsace villosa type and Daphne outside in a cool humid place, can be helpful. Grey mould or botrytis can be a problem in muggy spells. One has to be vigilant and spray promptly. I use ‘Supercarb’ as fungicide but there are many other brands on the market that are equally effective. Birds, cats, deer and mice are quite troublesome and are dealt with by physical barriers, ultrasonic deterrents and mouse bait.

Compost

Constituents should be easily and reliably available locally. I use a 1:1:1 mix of JI no.3, peat/cambark, and coarse grit 3-5 mm for almost everything I grow. For seeds, I use finer grit and add an extra part of peat. I find the extra peat results in improved germination, possibly due to a lesser likelihood of the compost drying out. For bulbs, I add half a part of super coarse perlite. Perlite is expanded volcanic rock and has many good properties. It is light, ‘opens’ the compost, provides extra drainage and holds moisture. The only disadvantage is its white colour, which can be a problem, as the particles look similar to bulblets or rice grains and this makes bulb repotting rather awkward. For high alpines that in nature grow on cliffs or screes, I add an extra part of grit.
Potting on a large plant into a bigger pot can be quite tricky. I get someone’s assistance for this delicate operation. I have constructed a rectangular board made of 4 pieces of wood screwed together, which fits between the plant and pot. After removing the top dressing, I fit the board in place and turn the pot over. The pot can then be easily removed. After placing two overlapping pieces of cloth over the root-ball and an appropriate saucer about an inch thick, I replace the same pot on top. The whole thing is then turned back over. The thickness of the saucer prevents sudden upward pressure on the plant when the pot is turned over. The board is then removed, the plant lifted by the two pieces of cloth and placed into a larger pot with appropriate amount of fresh compost at the bottom. The cloth is then removed and then it is a simple matter of trickling compost down the side to fill the new pot. I only do this for very large plants, e.g. a plant in a 10" pot being repotted in a 12" pot, when there is a danger of the root ball crumbling completely if not handled properly.
Watering

This can only be learnt by experience. Factors that affect watering are the type of pot, plastic or clay, whether plunged, the compost mix, the time of year, etc. It is best to give a thorough watering followed by a drying out period rather that a little bit of water every day.

In winter, I water the plunge about once a month, depending on weather conditions, as there is a significant amount of growth that goes on unseen. Little watering is necessary for 6 months of the year (October - March) except for bulbs, which needs watering proportional to the amount of top growth. The two critical times to watch out for is February and August when too much water can be detrimental.

Repotting

Bulbs are repotted every year or every other year. Alpines are potted on. I tip the plant out, remove some of the soil to loosen root ball and pot on in a larger size pot.

This is my rough calendar guide for repotting particular plants although there is, however, a lot of overlap.

January: Silene, Pleione, Viola (summer-dormant)
February: Ranunculus (? end Nov)
March-July (Aug): alpines usually after flowering
May: Dicentra peregrina. Chinese Fritillaria - never really go dormant
June: Cyclamen, Iris winogradowii, Cypripedium (June/July)
July: Galanthus, Narcissus
August: Corydalis, Fritillaria, Erythronium, Crocus (autumn-flowering), Mediterranean orchids
September: As Aug + Crocus (spring-flowering), (Iris - oncocyclus and juno)
October: Iris - oncocyclus and juno, Corydalis - lilies, deciduous lewisias, Trillium, (Tulipa), (American Fritillaria?)
November: Calochortus, Tulipa, (Ranunculus)
The summer-dormant American violas, such as Viola beckwithii, V. hallii and V. trinervata, are quite tricky to grow. I grow them in pots when the watering can be carefully controlled. After flowering, I give them just enough water to prevent the roots from shrivelling. No direct watering if grown in clay pots that are plunged. In plastic pots I give a little water from below once in a while from dormancy until January when more regular watering can be resumed.

Silene hookeri subsp. bolanderi goes dormant for a long time after flowering and repotting is best left until January just when growth is about to start.

Alpines are repotted as necessary usually after flowering but for summer flowering alpines, this can be done earlier. I aim to complete repotting by end of July, exceptionally until end of August. If left too late, it is best to wait until the following spring, as the plants may not establish in the new compost before the dormant season sets in. Sometimes repotting of a big plant may not go smoothly and especially for cushions, rosettes may start dying back. It is sometimes possible to rescue the situation by prompt removal of the dead rosettes and dusting with sulphur but if the situation is too advanced it is better to give up and start over again.

I rarely do a complete repot. This is done for plants that are not growing at all and the compost may have gone sour. The full repot method is carried out from March to end of June at the latest to give time for the plant to settle in the new compost during the growing period.

Although ideally each plant should be repotted when it is pot-bound at the right time of the year for the particular plant, potting on can be done at any time when the weather is moderate. There are no rules, only results.

Feeding

If plants are repotted at regular intervals, they do not require additional feeding. Old, established plants that have not been repotted
BULBS

While in nature, there is quite a lot of variability in a particular population of bulbs, judges like to see uniformly in a pot of bulbs on the show bench.

_Fritillaria_ is an increasingly popular genus and _fritillaria_ classes are guaranteed to be well filled at shows. There are many selections of _Fritillaria pyrenaica_ including a large flowered clone known as 'Cedric Morris'.

![Image of Fritillaria flowers](image)

The Juno irises are among my favourite and most prized bulbs. They tend to flower very early and therefore are not often seen at shows. Their one drawback is that the flowers do not last very long and many plants are at their best for only a few days. As you can see with this _Iris kuschckewiczii_ JJA 94 (22) they are beautiful plants.

_Iris kolpakowskiana_ (23) is one of the most attractive but also one of the most difficult in the Reticulata group. It is not often seen at shows as it is very early flowering. The bulb rots easily and it should receive the minimum of water until February when it is well into growth.
and bulbs are fed about once a week with half strength tomato feed or ‘Glostrogen’ throughout the growing season. I use a diluter connected to a hose to make the task of feeding easier. Alpines are fed March to August. Bulbs are fed once growth is evident, ideally with a high nitrogen fertiliser (N:P:K, 2:1:1) early in the season to feed the leaves.

**Turning pots**

Plants should be evenly flowered for showing. Generally throughout the year I turn the pots a quarter turn every week. Nearer showtime, plants, especially cushions may need to be turned more frequently.

**Showtime**

There are many opportunities for exhibiting as the SRGC run 11 shows and the AGS 22 shows a year both competitive and non-competitive. Most of the shows take place in the spring; late March to middle May as this is the peak flowering season for alpines and dwarf bulbs. All the show details can be found in the show schedules. The paper copy of the AGS show handbook is now only being sent to judges and known exhibitors. New exhibitors and members who require a copy need to apply for one. It is available for download on the website.

**Plant preparation**

**What are the judges looking for?**

Make sure the plant is eligible and within the size limit for the class if there is a restriction otherwise it will be disqualified as ‘Not as Schedule’ (NAS). Do not rely on the marking on the pot. Sizes quoted are usually the internal diameter 1” down the pot. Judges use standard calipers that measure the external diameter.

At SRGC shows there are 2, 3 or 6 pans classes with maximum 17.5 cm external diameter. Other classes have no maximum size. At AGS shows, there are sections for maximum 19 cm and 26 cm
diameter and in the Open Section, the pot size should not exceed 36 cm diameter.

The condition of the plant and the skill in cultivation and sometimes the rarity in cultivation are taken into account. Plants should be healthy and, tight in growth, i.e. in character. There should be no aphids, caterpillars, slugs and snails. They should be well flowered (for flowering plants) but have no faded flowers. There should be no nibbled or dead leaves and the pots should be clean with horizontal labels.

Other classes include 'new, rare or difficult' and 'grown from seed' where plants need not be in flower although it is an advantage if they are; plants for foliage (silver, purple); plants (usually cushions) out of flower; conifers; troughs and cut flowers.

Judging, however, is an inexact science. Sometimes a decision may appear perplexing to both exhibitors and spectators. Fortunately most exhibitors take the attitude that 'You win some, you lose some and there is always another show'. In SRGC, anyone with reasonable experience in growing alpines can be approached to be a judge. Some initially start by shadowing more experienced judges.

Clean pots

Presentation is of the utmost importance. It goes without saying that the pot needs to be clean. Nothing detracts more from the appearance of a beautiful well-grown plant than a dirty pot. I use scourer pads dipped in sharp sand if necessary to remove the lime deposits and moss that have invariably covered the rim of the pots.

It is also important to have a horizontal label to prevent spectators having a cricked neck trying to read the name of the plant. I print the name on white labels and stick them on white plastic labels. I then straighten a paper clip and use 'blu-tak' to hold it in place at the back of the label. Some exhibitors find it more convenient to use a label pin while some simply lay the label horizontally on the surface of the pot.

If a plant is overlapping the pot it can be placed in a bigger pot
SHRUBS (and a Viola)

There is no doubt about Daphnes being shrubs. The dwarf varieties make ideal plants for growing and showing. They come in a variety of colours, pink (e.g. *Daphne petraea* 'Grandiflora'), almost red (e.g. *D. petraea* 'Lydora'), pure white (e.g. *D. cneorum pygmaea alba*) and yellow (e.g. *D. calcicola*). *Daphne petraea* 'Lydora' (24) is a recent introduction but already well established. It is slow growing and for me it is the best *D. petraea* selection so far. It has all the potential for the premier award at shows.

*Verbascum dumulosum* (25) however, is a shrub although when I showed it in the shrub class, the show secretary threatened to cut it to see whether it had a woody base! It is reputed not be totally hardy but can be tried outside against a south-facing wall.

*Viola delphinantha* (26) is a plant that does not qualify for the shrub class despite being a sub-shrubby perennial viola with a woody rootstock. It is deemed not to be in the spirit of the shrub classes. It comes from Greece and Bulgaria amongst limestone mountain rocks. It requires a very gritty well drained limey compost, full sun and careful watering in the dormant season in winter. It dies back to an underground rhizome in summer when it should be kept dry until January.
and the gap filled with grit. This sets it off better. Make sure the top of the inner pot does not show, as this is not popular with judges.

**Top dressing**

This is a matter of personal preference. There are a variety of different grits and chippings that are suitable. Pieces of limestone, moss, bark and dried leaves can all be used and can add greatly to the effect of the exhibit. Small pieces of coal as a top dressing for silver foliage plants can be very attractive.

On the day before the show, if time permits, I put all my exhibits on a table to see the overall effect. This is especially useful for the multiple-pan class when the plants can be arranged to get the right position for maximum visual effect. This is also the time to photograph the plants as some of the plants may have gone over by the time you get back home the next day.

**Timing**

Nobody is interested in how many flowers there were yesterday or will open tomorrow. You need to get the timing right on the day. Cool sunny days are ideal in that respect. You can hold back a plant for a few days by withholding water and keeping it in the shade and giving it as bright a position as possible. Conversely a plant can be watered and put in full sun to bring it on more quickly. You may need to plan a week or more in advance to get the plant to peak on the day. These methods are perfectly legitimate but should not be overdone as they can spoil the character of the plant. Some plants are only at their peak for a few days, while others can remain in good condition for up to 2 weeks or more. I once showed *Sebaea thomasii* at 3 consecutive SRGC shows over a span of 4 weeks. Similarly, plant for awards are judged on the condition of the plant on the day and not about the potential of the plant. I showed *Benthamiella patagonica* at Stirling show this year with only about a quarter of the flowers open. It is one of the S. American cushions with upturned flowers. I kept it in the shade for 2 weeks and at the Perth show it was at its peak when it got a first prize in the ‘new,
rare or difficult’ class.

**Plants in the open ground**

Plants lifted from the open ground are eligible for showing but require more preparation to get in pristine condition. My first two Forrest medals came from plants lifted from the garden a few days before the show. *Jeffersonia dubia* is a delightful Japanese woodlander that seeds around in my garden. If you dig it up, remember that the root ball is much larger than the size of the plant, so you have to be careful not to damage too many roots in the process. It is difficult to get the timing right for this plant as it is at its peak for only a few days. Individual flowers do not last long and the leaves soon elongate to cover the flowers and spoil the show.

*Pulsatilla vulgaris* is one of the most easily grown of the pulsatillas. In my garden it seeds around profusely. It is a beautiful sight in the garden but I would now not dream of lifting it up for the show because of the fear of killing it. Pulsatillas have very deep taproots and do not transplant well. I once dug up a plant for the first show I exhibited at Glasgow in 1995. I got a first prize as part of a two-pan class but when I put it back in the garden it languished for 2 years before disappearing. If you want to show pulsatillas, grow them in pots at the outset.

**Finally**

Have a thought for the poor show secretaries who are liable to become nervous wrecks in the run-up to every show, worrying day and night whether the plants will arrive to fill the benches and grace the show hall. Usually the shows are a success due to the collective efforts of the exhibitors but remember that without the exhibitors, there can be no show. So I hope this will be the turning point for those of you who grow but do not show. Remember, it is the love of the wee plants that bring us together.

*Cyril Lafong*
SOUTH AMERICANS

There are many new South American plants introduced in recent years due largely to the collecting efforts of Flores and Watson.
**Benthamiella patagonica** (27) is one of several benthamiellas that grow in South Patagonia and is the one that has performed best so far in cultivation in the U.K. It forms a firm tight cushion.

**Jaborosa volckmannii** (28) is a rare endemic of central, southern Chile, typically growing on mountain slopes in loose pumice sand. It is a beautiful and distinctive plant worth every effort to establish in cultivation.

**AND FINALLY**

The last plant I shall mention is *Penstemon uintahensis*. This small but very attractive plant flowered for me for the first time this year. It was grown from seeds collected by Ron Ratko of Northwest Native Seeds in 1999 in Central Uinta Mountains, Uinta County. It is one of the dwarfest of all penstemons and is rather tricky to grow and flower. I showed it at the Perth show this year in a small (5"") pot but it is a plant that has given me and I hope others, much pleasure and makes the effort of growing and showing alpines so worthwhile and rewarding.