

The SRGC - The Next 80 Years

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The club is eighty years old! So let's look ahead. This issue of *The Rock Garden* is number 130 in a set dating back to 1933. At one time anyone with a complete set of the SRGC journal was thought lucky to have in their possession such a compendium of knowledge about rock gardens, their plants and the people who grew and still grow them. Today, anyone may consult back issues on our web site. The knowledge is freely available to members and non-members alike. Glassford Sprunt even maintains an up-to-date index to make it as easy to use as possible. The advantage that members have over non-members is that it takes a couple of years for each new edition to make it to the web site. The history of *The Rock Garden* or *Journal of the Scottish Rock Garden Club*, as it has always been known, illustrates several things.

First, things get better as time passes. Printing and publishing have changed from the early days of issues that were little more than pamphlets, through a whole series of improvements driven by technology. Progressively, line drawings, black and white pictures and colour plates have been introduced until today the journal can have colour anywhere, on any page. The widespread use of digital cameras and phones has enabled many members to contribute their pictures to the journal.

Second, cultivation techniques change, also driven by developing technology. New materials have altered our greenhouses and gardens. Various insecticides and fungicides have come and gone as we learnt their powerful effects on us and the environment as well as on the pests at which they were aimed. We are now encouraged to fight pests and diseases with natural remedies. The over-riding principle must be to keep our greenhouses and gardens as tidy as possible, to reduce the need for chemicals. However, this contradicts modern-day exhortations to leave rotting wood, piles of leaves and weedy areas to benefit wildlife. At home, Anne and I feed the birds but expect the fauna to find solace elsewhere. Having experienced the loss of crocuses and other bulbs through predation by 'wee *sleekit*' but not so 'cow'rin' and less than 'tim'rous' mice has taught me to encourage neighbours' cats to prowl around the garden.

Third, travel articles show us that over time our members have visited many different countries to look at plants. Politics and wars have meant that over the past 80 years almost every country has at one time or another been open and then closed or closed and then opened to plant-hunters. The exceptions are the countries of the Commonwealth and the USA, although holiday travel during World War II was clearly limited. Even during wars plant enthusiasts managed to bring or send back plants,

seeds and cuttings. From the earliest days of exploration people have taken plants with them and returned to their home lands with foreign species. The Romans brought food crops and decorative plants to Britain. One enormous benefit from this is that hybridizing between plants from well-separated homes has produced progeny more suited to horticulture. In future, restrictions on collecting may diminish the number of new hybrids. Perhaps we will have to raise them using pollen sent round the world in the same way that a bull in Scotland can sire calves in Australia, South Africa or Argentina. Oh to be the owner of that champion pollen donor plant! Will this be the future impetus behind growing and showing Forrest medal plants? We might have stud books for plants. The pursuit of the curious has encouraged foreign travel since Victorian times or before. Long may this continue!

Fourth, we - the general public and many governments - are more aware of the natural world and its resources. We understand now the need to protect wild places with their plants and animals. Whereas once upon a time clumps of alpiners could be dug up, brought back to the UK and planted in a garden, nowadays it may be illegal to collect even a few seeds. The laws are tougher. Various governments have decided to protect their native plants. In these days we are encouraged to look at and photograph the flora of distant lands rather than dig them up as up trophies.

Perhaps it is thought that unscrupulous foreigners will make a fortune from the pharmaceutical properties of some rare gentian or primula. I am baffled by the apparent inconsistency of some countries who allow locals to dig up tubers for food but prevent plant hunters from removing a couple of the same tubers for propagation, so that the beauty of their flowers may be enjoyed around the world. I understand that the conditions attached to seeds collected under licence in some countries require that their progeny must be grown only in specific - usually botanical - gardens. Time and experience have shown us that spreading plants around several gardeners and gardens is the best way to ensure the plants are maintained in cultivation. Good examples of this are the hundreds of rhododendron species growing in gardens all over Scotland and northern England, Wales and Ireland that were raised from seed collected in the inter-war years. Perhaps in the future, members of clubs like the SRGC will be included in the lists of permitted growers? This would certainly be good for our recruitment.

Fifth, the number and identity of professional nurseries change over time. Names come and go. Old favourites sink into oblivion while new and enthusiastic propagators open their doors. I hope there will always be those among us who enjoy raising and propagating plants for all to enjoy. Club plants stalls will always be treasure troves. The pleasure of raising new things from seed and increasing plants by cuttings will always ensure

that we have some specialist nurseries. Improvements in postage and delivery times, including faster air travel, modern packing materials and changes in the law may make it possible to import legally plants from almost anywhere in the world. We must treasure those nurseries we have but should not be surprised if hardy herbaceous plants become a bit more expensive in future. Costs at all stages of plant production increase annually for professional nurseries. An exception seems to be orchids, where plants that at one time were difficult to raise from seed are now produced by the shed-load (or should that be greenhouse-load?). Once again this owes much to new techniques and scientifically developed production methods.

One thing that has not changed is our members' love of small hardy plants and bulbs and their desire to see them growing in gardens and in the wild. We still crave new things but I hope we appreciate all the species and varieties already in cultivation. A quick look at the SRGC seed list proves that no one grows everything. The ways in which we share our plants also change, although shows and group meetings are often the best places to find some special treats.

The Future

All this makes me wonder what will happen in the future? Membership numbers rose steadily until perhaps the late 1980s before entering a slow but steady decline. Accompanying this is a rise in our average age. This shows that we are quite successful at retaining older members but have been less successful in replacing those who lapse with new younger ones. Perhaps it is true that those of us just entering retirement are part of a very privileged generation. Its members had time for gardening and attending club meetings and shows while they were working and raising their families. Possibly few other generations *'had it so good'*! Various reasons are advanced for this decline in membership but I believe that today's young families have much less leisure time and less disposable income. However, our club - like many other organisations - will have to reinvent itself in the modern world. This will involve changes in the things we do and how we do them. We must provide information about our hobby to modern people in the ways in which they want it. Rock gardening could become part of stress reduction lifestyles.

Since few nurserymen have made their fortune from the progeny of imported plants, laws might be modified so that only those plants which prove to be commercially exploitable, usually as medicines or for industry, are taxed. A portion of the profits could be returned to the region of origin to better the living conditions of poorer people.

The Digital World

Technology won't stand still for us. We now live in the world of instant communication and hi-tech gizmos, instant access to information, facts, videos and photographs and - if you believe TV - instant gardens. We

need to embrace the iPad and its inevitable successors. The SRGC has already taken a big leap into the world of electronic communication with its world-leading web site. I am sure that if we included all those using the SRGC forum and web site as members and then averaged our members' age, we would come to a much lower figure that would truly reflect the vibrant community of the web site. If we were to include the web enthusiasts in our statistics, SRGC membership would probably soar to new heights. Anyway, we all know that SRGC membership keeps us young and beautiful enthusiastic.

Since it was established over a decade ago the web site has had to move host and upgrade its bandwidth because of the massive increase in traffic. Thousands visit our site every month and our forum has innumerable threads covering the whole gamut of rock gardening topics. Some of them cover topics I never even thought about! These threads could form the basis of articles for *The Rock Garden*, be it paper or digital. There must be hundreds of untapped authors out there. Many people think that digital communication is the way of the future. I still think that many will want paper copies of books and journals, especially of publications like *The Rock Garden*. However, an increasing number of people look for all their information on-line and they won't want paper. This is why the club is introducing the new electronic subscription to give members all the benefits except hard copies of *The Rock Garden*, the seed list and other notes. I am now used to reading novels on a Kindle and still find several drawbacks with it but it is certainly very handy and space saving. I can see that tablets like iPads have a great advantage even over laptop computers but my own worry is about vulnerability to breakages and theft. In the future, more and more communication with members will be digital and, as postage rates increase, more people will demand digital versions of every document. It seems almost magical to sit in the living room, touch a few buttons and keys, and make *The Rock Garden* appear on our laps. Most of us are delighted to read *The International Rock Gardener* on screen and don't print it. I suspect this is because we first encountered it on screen and we know where it is. Maybe all information will be treated in the same way. Nevertheless, I must say that I do like books!

The internet will play a huge part in our future. Will we have lectures on the web to download and run on our televisions? We might use them as a substitute for, or addition to, local group meetings. The lecture could go to the meeting without the lecturer. It happens already. Ian Young will be lecturing in New Zealand in the spring (late summer there) while remaining in Aberdeen. There may be video conferences between members. Special interest groups will form and members will pick and choose their discussion. Live conferences via voice-over-internet systems such as Skype can be almost cost-free and are already well used; practical gardening demonstrations can be screened anywhere. All may be

uploaded via video sites such as YouTube and shared around the world. In the same way we could 'walk around' members' gardens. Look them up on Google Earth, knock on their door, ask for a digital peep thro' the garden gate and - hey presto - a new garden to enjoy! Nurseries will increasingly move in on the technique to show their stock to web visitors and to highlight new and special plants. Members will make their choices instantly, clicking as they go. Orders will be made up during the 'visit' to the e-nursery while admiring the plants and will be sent at the end of the visit after payment with the least possible fuss. In the case of organizations like the Royal Horticultural Society and the National Trust for Scotland, e-visitors and on-the-ground visitors could ask for plants in the garden to be specially propagated for them. This would be an excellent way to make sure that more unusual plants, not just the easy-to-propagate, entered wider cultivation.

Software will improve in many ways we do not always imagine. In my own world, for example, I need a cheap way to catalogue individual 'slides' in my PowerPoint presentations. I would then have a slide for every plant in my garden or my travels and they would assemble easily into new presentations. This is possible for individual digital pictures but, once combined with the name, animation and other views in a PowerPoint presentation, the only way to find a slide cheaply is to run through the whole programme. Special horticultural blank slides will be produced so that we can all make perfect presentations with several views and easily-read unobtrusive plant names.

The Media

Imagine *'From my Alpine House'* becoming a worldwide hit! Interactive programmes could be broadcast at published times to allow maximum participation and could be available on the iPlayer. In *'Strictly Come Gardening'*, professionals will give novices intensive tuition to transform them into enthusiastic expert gardeners in only three months. Then there will be *'The Apprentice Naturalist'* where students are given different *'improve the environment'* tasks. We will have new media gardening personalities. Why not university courses in horticultural media studies?

The Soft Gardener

Travel spends time and money, causes pollution and risks catching diseases, especially for plant hunters. Many special and desirable plants seem to be native to the less well developed parts of the world where diseases are endemic. We could travel there via a world wide web of webcams, perhaps on drones or robot roamers. Look up Switzerland, choose Zermatt, zoom in, fly around, discover androsaces and gentians on your screen, choose the best angle and take a photograph. Remote cameras will have better and higher powered lenses, increasing their usefulness. Instead of flying hostile warmongering drones over Afghanistan, rock gardeners could control their cameras to hunt for

dionysias ... it is perhaps more likely that members on holiday will upload pictures and video to websites where they interact with folk at home. Plants might be identified *in situ* (this is already done using mobile phones, Google and online encyclopaedias). A repartee might develop between the plant hunters in the hills and people at home using iPads. Questions about soil types, aspects, sun or shade, wet or merely damp ground and other growing conditions could be asked and answered; areas for further exploration could be pointed out. One day, people might be dispensed with, just like the Mars Rover but now controlled by Scottish Rockers ... or maybe not. All this electronic information could be catalogued and made available in short pieces on srgc.net.uk!

Perhaps less farfetched is the opportunity to use the roads being built for the wind farms and pylon lines to open up more hillsides to walkers. If the windmills continue to spread over the world and their roads were open to the public, who knows what new plants might be discovered at the new roadsides? Much of the botanizing done in the USA is within walking distance of motor roads, so discovery of new plants seems very likely as the road network expands.

In times to come, holographic images will be projected into rooms where we will wander through distant places as if we were really there. 'Star Trek' already has this technology. Don't laugh! When Captain Kirk spoke via his wee hand-held plastic communicator from a planet to Scotty on the *Enterprise*, mobile phones were still to come. When Lt Ohura retrieved information from plastic discs in wall slots, CDs, DVDs and computer discs had not been invented. Computers filled whole rooms and it was ridiculous to believe you could carry one around. Now most of us have mobile phones with cameras and gizmos with phenomenal computing power. We already have cameras with built-in projectors as well as 3D cameras and TVs. Hologram cameras will be along soon.

Horticulture

Leaving technology behind, there will changes in horticulture. We will understand the specific needs of more plants and be better able to raise them from seed and grow them to perfection. Micro-propagation techniques are developing and improving. Thus, plants which are rare today may become widely available in garden centres and nurseries. A new huge electronic garden shopping site like today's Amazon is bound to appear on the internet. If Amazon is for books and records the new site for plants could be 'Sierra' or 'Cairngorm'. Plants won't be sent to garden centres to be ignored until bought but will be dispatched direct from growers to gardeners. Nurseries and amateurs alike could 'post' their plants on the site. I must buy shares in delivery companies (delivery companies? I think he means '*logistics solutions offering a fully integrated nursery and distribution service, providing order fulfilment facilitation tailored to your market requirements*'. Ed.)

Erecting a tent with ropes and poles used to take a long time but now we have tents that pop up in seconds. Why not pop-up cold frames and greenhouses? Use them where and when they are needed and pack them away until next time. The glass in greenhouses might be integrated with solar panels to generate free electricity for the house and garden.

Science will produce new insecticides and fungicides, probably more species-specific than today's sprays, which tend to kill indiscriminately. We will have chemicals to target only pests and not harm birds, animals or 'good' invertebrates. New composts with better properties will be developed from waste products. Present-day bags of compost are heavy and expensive to transport. We already have dried Coir blocks on sale but they can be difficult to re-wet. I foresee a new era when water will be removed from the composts before sale. Absorbent granules in the compost will allow the gardener to rehydrate it readily. There will be new and rapid composting methods for all household waste. In the future we might be able to use food containers as plant pots or they too might be bio-degradable. Today, we use fleece to cover and warm the ground to get earlier crops but perhaps we will have granules to absorb heat during the day or transform sunlight into heat in the soil.

Imagine a future when amateurs have home kits to make gene transfers between species. Instead of searching for better yields from food crops, which is the aim of the commercial world, amateurs would be seeking new flowers and better foliage. Look at how traditional selection has changed daffodils. This has been achieved by generations of selection and crossing. We may not like all the resulting double and deformed varieties but they exemplify what is possible. How would we feel if someone introduced genes for colour into snowdrops? Would we like blue and red snowdrops? Would they still be white and have red markings or would the petals and markings both change? How about big snowdrops half a metre tall? We might not like them but if they were easy to grow in Scotland in February they could become commercial florists' flowers. The idea might apply to a whole range of species. One advantage is the saving of thousands of gallons of fuel used to fly flowers from developing countries in Africa and South America to Europe and North America. Instead, the areas cleared of natural forests might produce food crops. If we raised sterile flowers they would last longer in florists' shops and the home; we would need fewer bunches. Transport costs and environmental pollution would be reduced. I am sure that gene therapy will result in plants resistant to certain diseases and, hopefully, 'anti-freeze genes' may be inserted into species that we in Scotland find tender.

One of the curses of the international horticultural trade is that diseases are carried across borders. It happens everywhere and is particularly poignant in the UK; as an island we have been isolated from many continental diseases such as Dutch elm disease. More recently we have been warned about *Phytophthora* that affects rhododendrons and

larches; other diseases affect pines and ash. We will need to reintroduce effective plant inspection at our borders or make sure we have sufficient home-grown trees and shrubs. Monoculture leads to the spread of diseases as well as being aesthetically boring. Naturally produced seed from a multitude of sources, such as that in the SRGC seed exchange, will become increasingly important; every seed gives a plant that is slightly different genetically and probably physically from all others. We need to maintain diversity in all gardens.

We must ensure that the species and varieties we grow in our gardens are maintained in cultivation in the future, in case it becomes impossible to reintroduce them from the wild. Industry will patent various new plants but we should try to resist depending on cloned lines. Variety is and always should be the spice of gardening - unless you are into carpet bedding. The most important thing all members must do is to enthuse new generations of gardeners. They may be children, adults whose families are older, or even the recently retired. We already know that gardeners tend to be happier and more content, with lower blood pressure and stress than the general public. '*Get gardening – reduce your stress!*' may be the slogan to replace '*Brush your teeth, twice a day*'. Would the British National Health Service pay for gardening courses? We could become consultants in stress reduction. Whatever else happens in the future we may be sure that people will always be keen to visit distant lands to find new introductions and gardeners, and to grow beautiful plants in their own gardens. If gardens are small, attention will focus on smaller plants and bulbs. Rock plants, alpines and their environment will continue to fascinate photographers and artists. Poets will still dedicate rhymes to them.

We will keep 'The Rock Garden' at the forefront of horticultural innovation. If our descendants in the SRGC get it right our club will be just as vibrant, necessary and relevant in 2093 as it is today. As always, the SRGC will change with the times but surely it will always remain the 'World's Friendly Garden Club'.

*What's nicer
than a dionysia?
It's hard to get,
and needs a bit
of grit.
A primula's
not so similar
but worth a try.
One expires in wet,
the other in the dry.*

Anon