

Custodians of Britain's living library

The charity Plant Heritage is ensuring that future generations will be able to enjoy the huge variety of plants that gardeners have cultivated over the centuries, says Ciar Byrne

Great paintings and sculptures are housed in purpose-built galleries and valuable objects in museums, but how can we preserve plants for future generations? This is the mission of Plant Heritage, a charity based near RHS Wisley in Surrey that this year is celebrating its 45th anniversary.

Plant Heritage oversees the National Plant Collections, a scheme under which anyone – from botanic gardens to nurseries and amateur gardeners – conserves as many varieties as possible of a single group of garden plants to ensure their continued cultivation or, in the case of some endangered species, their survival. At the moment there are 700 collections across the UK.

It was founded in 1978 as the National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens by Christopher Brickell, who was the director of RHS Wisley and went on to become the society's director general. The 1970s was the decade when gardening was all about pristine lawns and identikit plants bought from garden centres. 'The UK has a fantastically rich flora, and Chris wanted to ensure it was protected,' says Gill Groombridge, the business manager of Plant Heritage.

From small beginnings the organisation began to grow, as local

groups formed to oversee the fledgling collections. Today they range from trees to houseplants, and there are about 95,000 individual species and cultivars within them.

In 2016 Plant Heritage launched its Missing Genera scheme, which highlights plants for which there is no national collection in the hope of encouraging people to consider starting one. This year the focus is on pollinating plants. These included *Echinacea*, or coneflowers, pretty herbaceous perennials that are loved by pollinating insects and look great in prairie planting schemes. There are around 200 cultivars listed in the RHS Plantfinder, but a collection could consist of just a subsection of these, >



Top row, from left: Judy Barker's chrysanthemums include 'Cottage Apricot', 'Mary Stoker' and 'Ruby Raynor'. Above: 'Rose Madder' and 'Cousin Joan'. Right: Gill Groombridge of Plant Heritage. Right: 'Mary Stoker' and Judy (left) receiving the Alan Bloom Award at the RHS

PICTURES: PLANT HERITAGE; JUDY BARKER



Judy Barker National Plant Collection holder of hardy chrysanthemums

You don't need to have a large garden to be a collection holder. Barker cultivates her hardy chrysanthemums on two allotments near her home in Hertfordshire. She has been growing them there since 2000, after buying a load from a nursery owner at a Hardy Plant Society autumn fair.

While some people gave her complicated advice on how to grow the plants – lift them, boil the roots, feed them, treat them with chemicals – she just left hers in the ground over winter, and they have come back every year since.

After she became a National Plant Collection holder the RHS asked her to join its chrysanthemum committee, which led her to finding out more about them. With the help of fellow expert Dr Barrie Machin she discovered that although they come from around the world, they all grow in the wild at around 45 degrees north, the southernmost edge of the ice sheets during the last glacial maximum. 'They retain in their memory the last major cooling of the Earth,' says Barker. 'I leave them in the ground, but I do put a mulch round them because I've learned that it's winter wet that kills them, not the cold.'

She now grows about 80 different cultivars, though at one point she had 200. This year she was presented with the Alan Bloom Award by the RHS herbaceous plant committee for her work.

'These plants have taken me on an amazing journey,' says Barker. 'My favourite thing is to sit on the allotment at end of October, when it's cold and there's a low sun, and watch them moving slightly in the wind. It's like looking into a kaleidoscope.'



for example plants bred before 2010. Collection holders are also needed for *Campanula*, *Erigeron*, *Gaura* and *Knautia*, among other plant genera.

Groombridge is happy if there is more than one collection of a plant. 'We welcome more than one in case there's an environmental disaster or a disease in a certain area,' she says.

Collection holders are encouraged to keep three specimens of each cultivar, although sometimes, as in the case of slow-growing trees, this isn't possible. Some collections focus on the scientific aspects of a plant group, others on its historical significance – for example, whether they were all developed by a single breeder.

Aspiring collection holders can contact Plant Heritage to discuss their proposal and find out more about what it entails. They will then go through a more formal application process, which involves discussing the proposed site of the collection, how the plants will be cared for and plans for its future stewardship. Then a local co-ordinator will come to visit, preferably when the plants are in bloom.

If that all sounds like too much responsibility, there are other ways of getting involved. Plant Heritage holds talks and workshops for its members, and organises an annual plant exchange and visits to collections. It also publishes an annual directory and a twice-yearly journal.

People who have rare or unusual plants in their gardens can also apply to become a 'plant guardian', though that's not as serious as it might sound. 'It's fun,' says Groombridge. 'If a plant dies we don't say: "Oh gosh, what happened?" – although we know that anyone who is in the scheme is always worried about that, myself included.'

For its 45th anniversary this year Plant Heritage mounted a special display at the RHS Hampton Court Palace Garden Festival, and an event at RHS Hilltop in Wisley with the TV gardener Alan Titchmarsh.

'A National Plant Collection is all about conserving species and cultivars,' says Groombridge. 'It doesn't matter if they are common or well-known, not so good-looking or just unfashionable. Our aim is to keep them in cultivation.'

Visit plantheritage.org.uk for further information and details about visiting National Plant Collections



Clockwise from above: *Hamamelis x intermedia* 'Pallida'; *Camellia sasanqua* 'Lavender Queen', 'Hugh Evans', 'Sekiyo' and 'Gay Sue'



Fiona Edmond National Plant Collection holder of autumn and winter flowering camellias and witchhazels

Edmond is the designer and owner of Green Island Gardens, a 20-acre private garden near Colchester in Essex which is open to the public. She moved there in 1996, and the woodland setting lent itself to growing witchhazels and camellias, both plants that like acidic soil. She started growing both, and after receiving an amazing response from visitors someone suggested she should start a National Plant Collection.

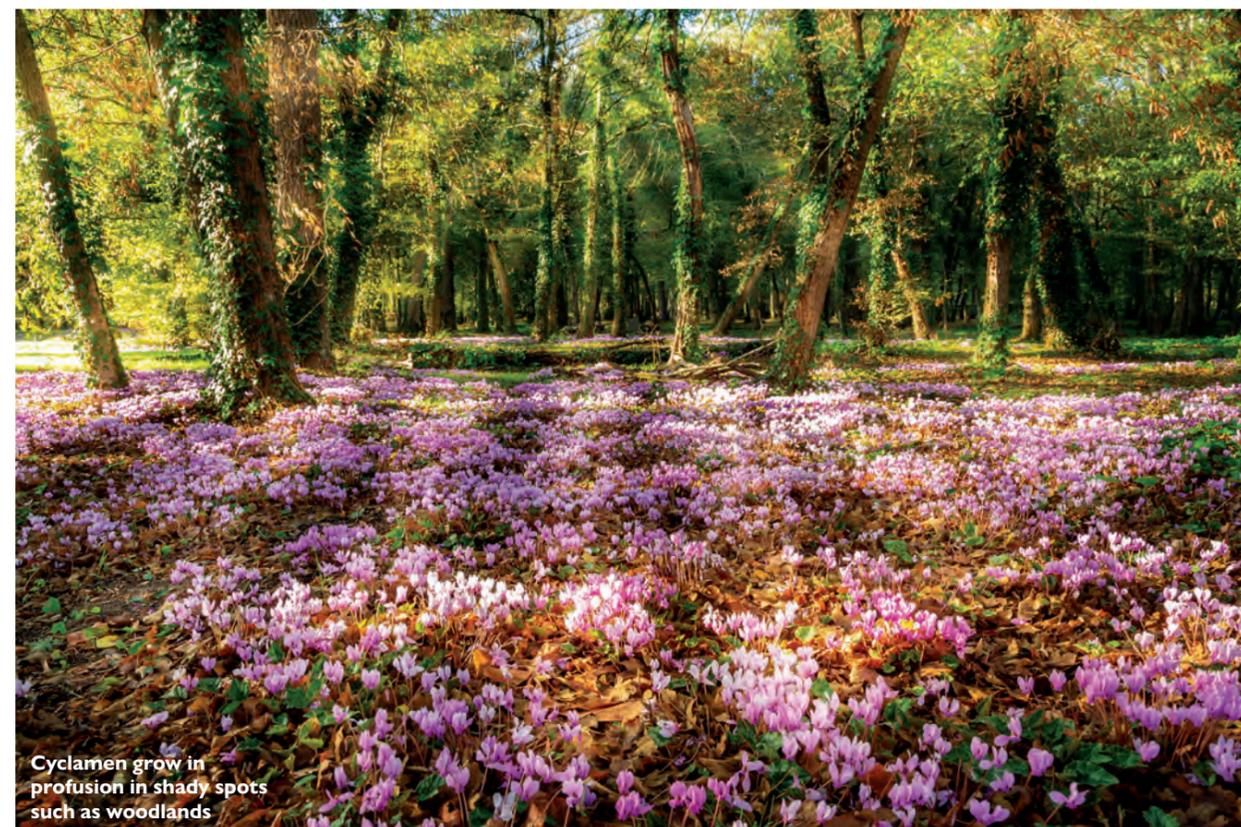
Witchhazels like moist but well-drained soil. They grow well in woodland shade, but in sunlight produce better colour in the autumn. 'We've got loads that aren't commercially available, but two I would like to see become more available are *Hamamelis x intermedia* "Basma" and "Tosca",' says Edmond. "Basma" has a long flowering period, and the flowers go through shades of yellow, orange and red as they mature, so at some point the petals are all three colours at once. "Tosca" is slightly later flowering, but it's almost got a coral tint to the petals.'

Autumn flowering camellias are less affected by frost than the spring flowering varieties, whose blooms can turn to a brown mush overnight. The best, says Edmond, is *Camellia sasanqua* 'Hugh Evans', which flowers from the end of September through to January.

Being a National Plant Collection holder is a responsibility she takes seriously. 'You do feel quite honoured, but it also makes you feel very responsible for it. When there's a drought in the summer they are my priority – let everything else die! They are like my children.'

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PICTURES: FIONA EDMOND



Cyclamen grow in profusion in shady spots such as woodlands

Jo Hynes National Plant Collection holder of cyclamen

Hynes has held one of the two national collections of cyclamen at Higher Cherubee, her two-acre garden in Devon, since 2007 (the other is at Birmingham Botanical Garden). She was already a member of Plant Heritage and chose the small Mediterranean plant species because she thought she would have plenty of room.

'I chose cyclamen because there are only about 23 species, and I thought I'd have enough space for them. I hadn't realised at the time that you've got to have three of each, so that's 69 pots. Then you find out there are sub-species and cultivars – it just grows and grows.'

Her garden and three glasshouses provide the perfect environment for these diminutive plants, which are found in the wild from France down into Africa and across to Russia. There is even a species growing in Somalia, although no one from outside the war-torn country has been able to collect it in recent years.

'The garden has got troughs and water, and a Mediterranean area

with gravel and paving that I use for the more tender and sun-loving varieties. It's got lots of dry-stone walls, so I've got cyclamen growing through the cracks,' she says.

Cyclamen like deciduous woodland, where they can enjoy shade in summer and moisture in



PICTURES: ADOBE STOCK

winter. They say there is a cyclamen in flower in every season of the year, but most species are dormant during the summer months.

She has built up her collection through seed and plant swaps with friends from the Alpine Garden Society and the Cyclamen Society. Before Brexit made it difficult to import plants into the UK, the wife of a Dutch grower who had died donated his collection to her.

In autumn the highlight of her display is *Cyclamen hederifolium*, including a cultivar she named herself called 'Spider's Web', which has silver leaves marked with a dark green web-like pattern. Over winter she grows *C. persicum* and *C. alpinum* in the glasshouse, then in February the first spring cyclamen appear outside, including *C. pseudoibericum* and *C. rhodium* subsp. *peleponnesiacum*.

There are two evergreen varieties that grow in summer: *C. purpurescens* and *C. colchicum*, but these are difficult to grow and prefer deep shade. ■