

# Experiences of Growing Herbaceous Plants for the Scottish Market<sup>®</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1974, after working for 22 years at Windsor Great Park, my parents returned to the Highlands of Scotland and started the nursery known as Highland Liliums. The nursery was started and named with a view to producing virus-resistant strains of hybrid lily. We had liaised with Scottish Horticultural Research Institute at Invergowrie on the propagation and marketing of lily bulbs raised by Dr. North. Today the lilies are still grown but on a much smaller scale than originally planned.

It didn't take long for us to realise that growing lily bulbs was not going to secure a solid future for us and, over the years, we began to produce other plants. Easier seed-sown items such as bedding plants, alpines, and herbaceous perennials were grown. A small retail operation began which sold these products and soon other stock was bought in to retail.

Development into bigger things took place with the advent of Scotstock Nurseries, marketing co-operative of which Highland Liliums became a member. Although ultimately stillborn this co-operative did have the beneficial effect of forcing us to sort out our production lines. We were growing alpines and perennials for the group, but now a wider range of plants was required and this involved growing techniques new to the nursery.

After Scotstock Nurseries we were able to grow and sell our range of plants through contacts made largely in the retail trade.

The next major development came in 1995 when, in partnership with two other nurseries local to us, we formed the marketing group Pict Plants. This group was based on the strengths of the nurseries involved:

- Riverbank Nursery at Connon Bridge, where Norman Fawcett had excellent propagation facilities and access to the more unusual sort of plants.
- Greens Nurseries at Nairn where Donald Green is involved in supplying bedding and herbaceous plants to retailers mainly in Scotland.
- Highland Liliums, producing a similar range to Greens but with distribution extending into England.

## PROPOGATION METHODS

In the early days all propagation centred around lily production. This involved scaling-down mature bulbs, washing the scales in fungicide and storing them in old drums in locally gathered sphagnum moss. The drums were kept moist at temperatures between 7 and 10°C. Scaling took place in November with small bulbils forming by the following February or March.

**Seed Propagation.** Diversification, in the early days, started with seed propagation. Seed was sown in standard seed trays on an open-topped propagation unit with poly

sides, black poly on floor, and heated with soil warming cable embedded in sharp sand. This method has remained totally unchanged and is still in use today. Pricking-out methods have developed over the years from using the peat block method inherited from lily production through Jiffy strips to modules. We currently use the Ellepot modular system which suits our nursery well. Ellepots are used for direct sowing of easier taxa with large seeds, such as *Lupinus* (lupin), *Acanthus*, *Alstroemeria*, *Crambe*, and *Rheum*.

**Softwood Cuttings.** The same propagation case configuration was soon also used for cuttings. This time an opaque polythene top was used to cover the case. Early material largely centred around shrubby stock plants which were available on the site. This soon led to more meaningful programmes to root alpine taxa of subjects such as *Phlox*, *Saxifraga* (saxifragae), *Sedum*, and *Thymus* (thyme). As we gained confidence with these, we moved on to propagate herbaceous subjects such as *Nepeta*, *Lamium*, *Euphorbia*, *Anthemis*, *Monarda*, and *Phlox*.

At the same time, to help produce a serious list of perennial plants, we embarked on a programme of lining-out certain subjects in an old walled garden to give us mother stock for propagating by means of division. This involved: *Astilbe*, *Hosta*, *Geranium*, *Iris*, *Chrysanthemum*, and *Aster*.

The combined effect of the different propagation methods was to give us the means of producing a good range of perennials and alpines. In these earlier days demand for extra plants had been created by the Scotstock nursery group.

It was during this period of rapid development that another method of propagation came to light, namely micropropagation. We knew that getting involved ourselves was not in the game plan, but suddenly new taxa and old favourites were becoming available. This meant that we had to look closely at our own propagation list and choose plants and numbers carefully.

It was soon obvious that the new plants coming out of the micropropagation laboratories were well received by the customers in the garden centres. Some of the subjects available early on were: double primroses, heucheras, potentillas, hostas, and asters.

For Highland Liliiums, the advantages of micropropagation over conventional methods were uniformity, and the ability to purchase large or small numbers. This made it possible for us to trial a new plant with only a few plugs to start with. Buying-in these plugs marked the start of a trend, replacing bare-root stock or liners. It gave us confidence to use plugs later as more and more plant material became available. Today all sorts of plants are available as plugs, ranging from seed sown, softwood cuttings, root cuttings, and micropropagated taxa. As a general rule we believe that if a plant is available as a plug the chances are that we can't produce it as cheaply ourselves. This is especially true of seed-grown taxa, less so the case with softwood cuttings. We find ourselves now using purchased plug stock as a source of cutting material. In the early days we would have planted out stock plants in beds and pruned for cuttings as required. Now we are using existing stocks of plants to produce the cutting stems, freshly rooted examples being preferred for cropping as they seem to give a better and quicker take.

The result of all this is that the current propagation programme is under constant review since plant and especially plug availability can determine what appears on the propagation list. Often the deciding factor comes down to the customers and the current trends in what they are buying.

## MARKETING

Perennial plants have enjoyed a steady run of popularity for the past 10 to 15 years, and that trend looks set to continue. But I believe that perennials are popular because they are good, garden-worthy plants. The average customer in the garden centres sees them as yet more round green blobs, but if they are attractive and covered in deliciously-scented flowers then they are away in the trolley and through the checkout.

There are a few absolute standbys in the perennial range. For example we still grow and sell more *Delphinium*, *Lupinus* (lupins), and *Nepeta* (catmint) than many other subjects, even though these are readily available nationwide. The reason for this is that they are all good performers, customers are comfortable with these plants, and they usually recognise their names.

Because plants such as these are available as plugs, we concentrate our production and propagation on the more unusual. Ornamental grass taxa are taken from seed. Softwood concentrates on the different or unusual, on good selling taxa that we are happy with, or maybe trialling one or two unusual plants. I sometimes think that we have turned into plant finishers rather than plant propagators. The reality is that we have to make more time to concentrate on picking, choosing, and trialling different plants. It is this concept that led to the creation of the marketing group Pict Plants.

**Pict Plants and the Highland Market.** When three nurseries grow similar crops in reasonably close proximity to one another it is inevitable that sooner or later they will get together to combine their interests to mutual benefit. Cooperation could have been relatively minor, like combining purchasing power, but we took it further to collectively market plants while combining the individual strengths of each nursery.

Growing for a retail market in the Highlands tends to mean that the hardier types of plant are grown to make us less nervous about what stock is taken through a winter. After some encouraging and informal meetings in 1994 we discovered that while Donald Green and myself had undertaken some plant promotions we had not used our location as a marketing tool, although Scottish branding at that particular time was enjoying success.

Together we thought that there could be some mileage in promoting ourselves as growers of plants in the Highlands. Plants would have to be trailed to ascertain full hardiness for all parts of the country, but the implication would be that Highland plants were hardy. We recognised that the plants we were to promote would have to be a little bit different, possibly unusual, but comply with the average customer's desire for plants that perform while being suitable for the smaller garden. Smaller than is than the average size of gardens in the Highlands. Another point was promotion of the plant's ability to perform in a wide range of applications, for example in a border, tub, associating with existing plants, or use with bedding and hardy plants.

So Pict Plants was duly formed as a marketing group, and as such attracted some financial assistance from R.A.C.E. (Ross and Cromarty Enterprise), mainly in the setting up and launching of the first promotion. Norman Fawcett at Riverbank Nursery was the prime mover in suggesting taxa to try since he seemed to have a raft of the different and unusual taxa of plants right there in his garden.

Fawcett was keen to produce finished plants in reasonable numbers in Year 1 before releasing liners to all members for growing on. This way he was happy that plants would perform for the others. Donald Green from Green's Nurseries and

myself would then grow on large numbers in subsequent years, varying numbers according to demand. As confidence grew with particular selections, propagation could take place among any of the members, leaving Fawcett free to pursue new selections and continue trialling and testing.

Our first promotion was launched at Scotgrow in 1995 and was a *Potentilla* selection called 'Grace Darling'. We linked a charity donation of 10p per plant to the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (a registered charity) which was very pleased to be part of it. The whole package was very well received and sold very well, probably just catching the tail end of the generic "Potentillas are Popular" marketing campaign.

The following year saw another four subjects joining the *Potentilla* while the current list of promotions stands at 13 plants.

Adding new selections each year was relatively easy in the earlier days but in 1999 we were not in a position to release any new promotions, much as we would have liked to. Ideally we would look to be in a position to have two new promotions coming on stream every year, while possibly letting one or two of the early promotions drop off the list, so at any one time we would be running with a collection of about 12 different plants.

Pict Plants has some interesting plants lined up for the next few years, but we are always on the look out for that unusual plant that just needs a lift to make it a thoroughly successful plant promotion. It is worth remembering that one of our best sellers has been *Prostranthera cuneata* which we named 'Tasmanian Mint Bush' — a combination of name, aromatic foliage with the promise of a flower proving irresistible to lots of customers.

## SUMMARY

Basic propagation techniques remain the same in that timing of striking is more important than ever with emphasis on taking ever softer softwood cuttings. These are more important than the differences in, for example, use of polythene covers versus mist.

We have to continually evaluate the cost effectiveness of any propagation scheduling in case other producers can do the job better or more cheaply. The result is that we channel our resources into propagating the more unusual, less readily available taxa. The good news is that these are usually more desirable, especially in the Highland Market.