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Gardening Scotland

Pam Whittle

Gardening Scotland, Scotland's Annual National Gardening Event, has become a regular feature in The Caley's calendar. However the background to the show and its strong links to the society are well worth remembering.

Sharing skills

From the very early years of the Caley in the 1800s there was a strong focus on demonstration as well as experimentation and sharing practical horticultural skills. Initially the Caley used a marquee for its shows, later to be replaced by The Caledonian Hall, which is now part of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. The Society's interest in shows was to display the *best fruit, the most choice flowers and the most useful vegetables* to grow in Scotland and to encourage and enthuse people to grow them.

After the integration of the experimental garden into the Royal Botanic Garden towards the end of the 1800s, the Society continued to hold shows. For a time shows were sited in Waverley Market, then in the Corn Exchange and later at Meadowbank, as well as occasional shows outwith Edinburgh. In 1997 the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) added a Scottish show to its portfolio of UK shows, which it held in Strathclyde Park. However after the third show in 1999 the RHS decided to end its Scottish show. Coincidentally, in the summer of 1999 the Caley found itself considering the future of its own shows and pondering how to mark the millennium. It was time for change.

Summer events

The Society decided to reshape its Spring Show and arranged to return to the Caley's former exhibition hall in the Edinburgh Botanic Garden for a two day Spring Show. At





Heavy machinery in the floral hall. Caley volunteers at work.

the same time discussions began about the possibility of a summer flower festival to be held in late July/early August. However, there was a strong groundswell of feeling that Scotland needed its own National Gardening Event and the Caley President, Fred Last, and Tom Mabbott, the Caley Secretary, were lobbied strongly. After a period of assessment, the plans for a summer flower festival were dropped in favour of establishing a national gardening show with the support of ScotGrow and the Horticultural Trades Association. By the end of 1999 planning was underway for a three day show in June 2000, a show that was to become *Gardening Scotland*.

Links

The decision to set up *Gardening Scotland* as a separate charity from The Caley, Scotland's national gardening and horticultural society, was deliberate. Nevertheless it is clear to see the links between the two charities are intertwined as the establishing objectives of *Gardening Scotland* were:

The advancement of the practices and knowledge of gardening, plantsmanship and horticulture for the public benefit.

To liaise with professional, trade, statutory and voluntary bodies with interests in



Good labelling is essential but time consuming.



Prize winning Streptocarpus just arrived from a nursery in Wales.

gardening, plantsmanship and horticulture, and use all appropriate means of communication, demonstration and written, to advance excellence in gardening, plantsmanship and horticulture.

Objectives which reflect The Caley's own objectives:

- To advance education in gardening and horticulture for the public benefit
- To encourage and improve the science, art and practice of horticulture in all its branches.

Success

The first *Gardening Scotland* was a resounding success. Fifteen years later, the show has become a fixture in Scotland's horticultural calendar.

One of the main reasons behind the Caley moving its own show from Meadowbank had been the declining number of local authority exhibits, a trend which has continued in Gardening Scotland, with the odd exception. Nevertheless floral displays and show gardens have been a constant feature albeit one the public and society would like to see much more of. But very few of these exhibits have been in the style of the traditional local authority bedding plant centre piece.

Developments

In the early days the show was held in the smaller Lowland Hall at the Highland Showground, before moving to the more spacious Highland Hall in 2004. This allowed for new features such as Bonsai, a display that continues to attract a considerable level of interest. In 2005 the Scottish Gardeners Forum (another group established by the Caley) introduced the Pallet Garden Competition. The initial idea was to encourage





The Caley stand.

local gardening clubs and societies to participate and there is no doubt that they have become an extremely popular addition to the show. The pallets now includes many school entries and whilst most of the participating schools are primary schools, with the help of teachers and parents, even children at nursery stage can take part. The Thursday before the show opens to the public is the children's day for building their pallets for what can only be described as creative chaos. Another feature added in 2005 was the BISCOT (Botanical Images Scotia) botanical illustration exhibition. Whilst botanical art had featured in earlier shows the introduction of an international competition has been very successful and adds another dimension to the overall event.

Whilst the Caley was integral to the establishment of Gardening Scotland, our close involvement has continued in a range of ways. Caley representation continues to be a requirement of the Gardening Scotland Board; no other organisation is a named requirement. The Society provides and organises the many volunteer stewards for the duration of the show and has a major presence in the Floral Hall providing advice and help for many of the 30,000+ visitors to the show each year.

Displays

The time and effort that goes into putting on a show is a long process for the show management team and for individual exhibitors. It certainly isn't just the few days





Children's activities on the Caley stand.



A Caley volunteer in action.



A visit by a First Minister.



The Caley stand provides information throughout the show, advice from a team of experts and displays entries for the best new plant award.



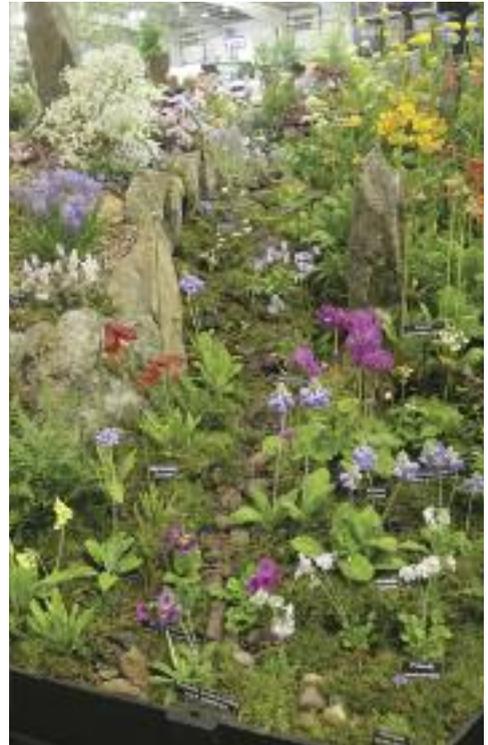
Part of the Caley's anniversary stand in 2009.



One of Binny Plants fine displays. © Rona Peddie



Fife [South West in Bloom were the people's choice in 2014.



One of Kevock's dramatic alpine displays.



Floral art.



Scotland's Gardens.



Macplants have been regular exhibitors of herbaceous plants.



An effective display of cut flowers.



A wide variety of outdoor and leisure activities are on display. Beechgrove filming.



Dig it! The public can now vote for their favourite show garden.

before and during the show. Sponsorship of the Floral Hall, initially from Dobbies, New Hopetoun Gardens and more recently from the Caley, does help but it is the displays created by the exhibitors, plant nurseries and specialist societies which attract people and draw them into the show. There have been some really stunning displays over the years. The Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh showcase piece, the Poppy Scotland Garden, and most recently the presence of some of the successful displays from Chelsea such as the 2014 figures made from plants which had been part of the Fifty Years of Britain in Bloom award winning display (jointly mounted by Fife and South West England Bloom campaigns). By regularly bringing high quality displays some exhibitors have made a huge contribution to the event. Long standing prominent Scottish exhibitors such as Binny Plants and Macplants, with largely herbaceous material, and Kevock Garden Plants with dramatic alpine displays, have a strong presence and others are joining their ranks.

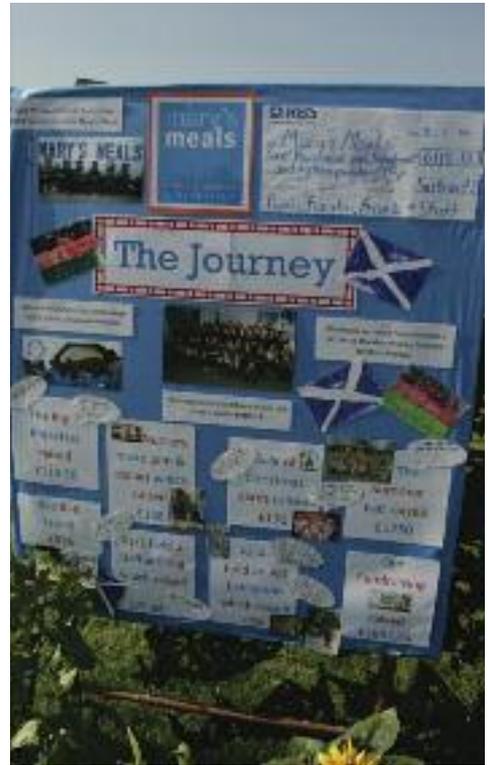
Whilst the showcase stands attract people into the hall their interest is sustained by the variety of exhibits large and small, the opportunity to buy plants, the floral art creations, and the botanical illustration exhibition, a chance to ask

questions and get advice as well as a chance to simply marvel at the displays. It would, however, be remiss of me not to mention 2009, a particularly special year for the Caley as it was our Bicentennial year. The Society had been keen to showcase a major display in the Floral Hall. It was a real challenge but the result was a gold medal winning display designed by Caley member and former Vice President, Beryl McNaughton of Macplants.

Challenges

It would be wrong not to recognise the challenges that have faced the show. Even at the end of May the weather in Scotland can be unpredictable; blazing sun at times or wet, windy and very cold the next day or even hour as happened in 2015 when we had a short hail storm. Other challenges have been the increasing cost of fuel, which has deterred some exhibitors and the impact of the recession which had a significant impact on many small specialist nurseries. The organisers try to ameliorate this by allowing free space for displays in the Floral hall, though a charge is made for sales tables and whilst medals are all linked to cash payments ranging from £500 for premier gold down to £50 for a bronze, several nurseries no longer feel travelling to the show from further south is feasible. As a result





The pallet garden competition is popular with schools.

there are some gaps in the plants that we would like to see on display; there have been no stands showing orchids, grasses, roses or violas recently. Another more recent challenge is the decision by the RHS to have a show at Chatsworth in Derbyshire in 2017 the weekend after Gardening Scotland. This may adversely impact on Gardening Scotland if more English based nurseries are drawn away. But perhaps the biggest challenge has been the search for sponsorship, in particular for the large show gardens outside, a feature which visitors wish to see more of. The cost of building high quality display gardens is significant but the Royal Highland Showground itself presents constraints. The amount of time allowed for building a show garden is limited, while dismantling has to be even more rapid to allow the Royal Highland Show to be staged and there are restrictions on what can physically be done to the ground - no digging!

Media coverage is crucial especially on television. Scotland's own Beechgrove Garden has covered Gardening Scotland since the show started but there are significant constraints and we could do with much more television coverage.

From the start the Caley has been keen for the show to strive for continuous improvement. And the Caley's involvement in Gardening

Scotland forms a key part in the delivery of our charitable objectives to encourage and improve the art and practice of all forms of gardening and horticulture for the public benefit. The Society's decision to sponsor the Floral Hall was a deliberate decision to make our involvement in the show more visible and to ensure a strong gardening and horticultural focus for the show.

The show has changed and developed and must continue to so. The time is right for further change and to welcome a new cohort of people to the benefits and delights of gardening.

Pam Whittle, 2 Halmyre Loan, Romanno Bridge, EH46 7DN.

Pam is a passionate amateur gardener and has been President of the Caley since 2011. She trained as a teacher but after teaching in London, Gloucester and Bristol moved to North Wales. Back in England she then worked in the NHS before moving to Scotland. She retired from the Scottish Government at the end of 2008 as the Director of Public Health and Health Improvement. Since retiring Pam has continued to be actively involved in a wide range of activities and is currently Chair of the Scottish Health Council, a Board member of Healthcare Improvement Scotland and a member of the Food Commission. In 2009 Pam was awarded the CBE for her services to public health in Scotland. She was a board member of Gardening Scotland from October 2010 until October 2015.



The morning after