Issue No. 55 April 2020

Friends of Thwaite Gardens Newsletter

As was suggested by your Chairman, Steve Howe, we are sending this newsletter to you on line as an interim measure during the lockdown. We will not be able to print any copies, as the printers are shut down like everything else.

Sue Swetez

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Hello Everyone

Welcome to our entirely digital newsletter at this time of social isolation and distancing. We regret that the only way Thwaite Gardens can be viewed is from the outside perimeter fence, and that does not include being able to see much of the Botanic Gardens – only a glimpse of the front lawn and borders, through the locked gates.

However, we are still Friends of Thwaite Gardens and the following articles are a link to the time we have spent there and the time we hope to spend there again. What matters is that we all survive the devastations of Covid-19. I hope you all keep well. Keep on gardening and enjoying whatever gardens you can see.

Annie Bourton Card

25.4.20

Open Day

This was scheduled for Sunday 17th May, but unfortunately, due to the Coronavirus lockdown it will not be possible to hold it this year.
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Basic Cacti Cultivation

Where should I grow my cactus?

Ideally in a greenhouse but many cacti can be grown on a sunny windowsill. It is probably best to use plastic rather than clay pots as the roots can stick to the side of clay pots and be damaged during repotting.

What compost do they need?

Cacti will grow in most types of standard potting compost with at least 25% of coarse grit added to increase drainage. A layer of grit on the surface helps to prevent algal growth and protects the plant itself.

How much water do they need?

During the growing season, April to October, most common cacti need watering about every two weeks. Wet the compost thoroughly but do not allow the pot to sit in water for any length of time, nor allow the water to sit on the surface.

Do not water again until the compost has dried out. Over-watering will do much more harm than under-watering.

During the resting months, November to March, water is not given and the cacti will visibly shrink at this time but they quickly return to normal when watering commences.

When repotting, use a new pot which is only slightly bigger than the old one, at most 1". Do not water for 2 weeks, to allow any root damage to heal.

An occasional spray with tepid water may help to keep red spider mite at bay.

How warm do they need to be kept?

In the wild some cacti are exposed to snow and frost but in cultivation they should be kept frost free in the wintertime. However a cool period in the winter when they are not watered encourages flower production the following season in mature plants. The British summertime heat does not normally trouble cacti, provided the ventilation is adequate.

How big will my cactus grow?

Size varies. Some are fully grown at 1cm, others are tree like. Carnegia gigantica, the large branched cactus you see in cowboy films does not begin to branch until its 50 years old!! So it's not recommended for windowsills.

Will my cactus flower?

It is not true that cacti only flower every 50 years! Just like any other plant they do need to be sexually mature before they flower and the age at which this occurs varies a lot. Most of the smaller types flower within 3 to 4 years from seed but some, which grow to the size of big trees, will take 20 years or more to mature. The good news is once they start to flower they should do so every year. In this country 95% of well grown, mature, cacti will flower and the probable cause of failure of a few types not to flower is the poor light density.

What types of cactus are the easiest to flower?

Cacti from the genus Rebutia are the easiest. Mammillaria Echinopsis and

Parodia provide a colourful display of flowers when 3 to 4 years old.

Do all cacti come from deserts?

No, whilst a lot do come from the semi-desert regions, cacti are found from Canada all the way through the Americas to the Southern tip of South America. Some grow in grasslands, some at high altitudes in the Andes and some in forests, as the other trees. Some are found in Tropical areas, others survive in severe weather at altitude. The plant commonly known as the Christmas cactus grows in trees in the forests of Brazil.

Bob Hall 23.4.20

TREES OF THWAITE – GREY POPLAR (*Populus x canescens*)

As we are all in lockdown at the moment and our gardens at Thwaite are out of bounds, I have picked a tree that is easily visible from outside the perimeter from the street. If you walk along New Village Road, to the east of Thwaite Hall, you will see this tree arching over the road. It is easily picked out by its rather grey green foliage and somewhat white, woolly looking tips. Although quite a big tree, Thwaite's specimen is fairly modest compared to many specimens of the species.

As you will note from the 'X' in *x canescens*, Grey Poplar is usually regarded as a hybrid tree, though largely self-sustaining by means of vigorous suckering. It quite often forms entire copses on its own. Many trees are therefore clones of some original and it rarely seems to reproduce from seed partly because the great majority of individuals and colonies are male.

The two parents of Grey Poplar are Aspen (*Populus tremula*) which is a British native tree and White Poplar (*Populus alba*) which probably isn't native, though not certainly so. Both these species have a wide distribution in western Eurasia as far south as North Africa and in the case of Aspen, to the far sub-arctic north, Aspen being one of very few trees native to Iceland. Whatever the native status of Grey Poplar, it is naturalised in Britain and in East Yorkshire it is particularly frequent on wet parts of the Vale of York. There seems to be a certain amount of back crossing too, so there is some variation and intergrading in wild populations that can blur the edges of the species in the strict sense somewhat.

Grey Poplar is arguably one of the finest of all poplars we can grow in Britain. It is certainly superior to *P. alba*, which has a rather ungraceful poorly balanced

habit, though is popular for its bright white leaves and tolerance of exposure. It seems almost a hallmark of east coast caravan parks. Aspen certainly is a better rival for habit but rarely comes near the power and majesty of the Grey Poplar at its best. The finest Greys seem to be found in rich river valleys where they can reach 40m in height. Their soaring limbs have a light creamy bark and heavy foliage, often somewhat swept over by the prevailing wind. They can make a stunning and atmospheric landscape tree. The individual leaves are quite variable in shape, generally roundish and coarsely toothed but sometimes vaguely lobed. Their woolly greyness tends to diminish with age.

Like many poplars, Greys are very fast growing. I once planted some on the edge of a sports field where I worked in Birmingham. Within 10 years they were respectable trees and last time I saw them, about 30 years after planting they were really quite big. On the whole though, Grey Poplar is not widely planted compared to others.

Grey Poplar flowers quite early in spring, often in March. The male catkins are quite appealing – slightly furry looking with red anthers. The females are greener. Each tree - and due to the clonal suckering, even every tree in the vicinity - is either male or female (dioecious). The catkins of the females, like all poplars, burst into masses of fluff containing the seeds when ripe. This gives rise to the American name for all poplars – Cottonwood.

There are not really any named varieties of Grey poplar, except 'Macrophylla' known as Picart's Poplar – which has unusually large leaves. I sometimes get the impression that certain populations of Greys have a tendency towards fastigiate habit, particularly in youth – perhaps due to the genetic influence of the fairly common fastigiate White Poplar (*P. alba* 'Pyramidalis')? However, I have never heard any authoritative mention of this, so it might just be a subjective impression.

Poplar feeding insects seem to use P. x canescens like any other species, so it is good for wildlife.

John Killingbeck 2020

Give Peat a Chance

In the late 1980s, Friends of the Earth, in conjunction with the charity Plantlife, launched a campaign to end the harvesting of horticultural peat from Hatfield and Thorne moors and thereby preserve the biodiversity of what was left of the Humberhead Levels, the largest area of lowland peat bog in England. The campaign owed much of its eventual success to the enthusiasm of botanist and TV personality David Bellamy, who sadly passed away last December.

Thus began a drive to reduce the use of peat by gardeners, which has become more urgent now that the contribution of peat bogs in storing carbon and thereby reducing global warming is understood. In 2011 the UK government set voluntary targets to phase out peat use in gardens by 2020, and by the professional horticulture industry by 2030. Manufacturers in the UK responded by introducing composts derived from forestry and agricultural wastes into their products, and by also declaring the remaining peat content on the bag. Both the Royal Horticultural Society and the National Trust, as well as major retailers B&Q and Homebase, have promoted peat-free compost as a growing medium.

Why, then, did an investigation by Friends of the Earth last year find that the use of peat for garden compost in the UK – mostly now imported from Ireland or the Baltic states - actually rose in the last decade, and is now around 2 million cubic metres annually?

From my recent experience visiting five garden centres in and around Cottingham, the answer seems pretty clear - they are doing their level best to ignore any targets. The majority of the compost available was from Irish manufacturers (e.g. Erin/Molloy, Growmoor,Bord na Mona) who either do not declare the composition of their (100% peat) product, or even boast of it being “highest quality Irish moss peat”. Other pure peat brands included Vitax and Premier. These were always the cheapest composts available, typically around 8 pence per litre. All but one of the centres also had composts from English manufacturers (e.g. Westland, Levington, Miracle-Gro,) which are part peat (40-90%), at around 9-12 pence per litre, depending on pack size. Their bags

mostly have a bar chart showing the percentage peat content, but that's assuming you can read the labelling in the first place – in all the garden centres I have visited, compost bags are stacked on pallets with their label-side down, so that you have to turn a bag over yourself to see any information at all about its content. The "John Innes" formulations of compost, whether numbers 1,2 or 3, and regardless of the manufacturer, contain 45% peat.

To be fair, only one of the five centres had no peat-free compost at all. All the others had one brand available- either Miracle-Gro Peat Free or Westland New Horizon - at 11-12 pence/litre, though in one centre, this was the only stack of bags without a price tag above it: when I enquired why this should be, I was told "well, we don't sell much of that".

This year I'm trying out a peat-free compost called Melcourt Sylvagrow, which has a great "feel" to it, and is highly rated by Which? Magazine. This came from the Cross Road garden centre in Hollym, near Patrington, which unfortunately is the nearest supplier.

Visit https://friendsoftheearth.uk and enter "peat" in the search field for a full discussion of this topic in FoE's 2019 briefing paper and, when you next stock up at your local garden centre, check the label carefully. Please, unless you are specifically growing lime-hating plants, give peat a miss.

Rohan Lewis

PLANT OF THE MONTH – SHRUBBY HARE'S EAR (*Bupleurum fruticosum*)

This is one of the strangest and least widely grown of the shrubs of Thwaite which I have chosen because it can be seen just inside the main gate on Thwaite Street, even without entering, which of course will not be possible until the end of lockdown restrictions. Although it may not actually flower until mid-summer, if restrictions do go on, people will still be able to observe it.

There are a variety of reasons why this plant might be regarded as unusual and even when in bloom may not appeal to everyone. The flowers are a slightly greenish yellow, a bit like those of fennel and not that eye catching. It must be said though, that Thwaite's specimen does not show the species at its best. Ours is a bit crowded in and perhaps less than ideally placed in terms of sun exposure. When grown well, it produces a unique hazy, fine textured display of dense flowering.

I mentioned Fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) as a comparable flower. This is mainly because *Bupleurum fruticosum* is in the same family as fennel – the *Apiaceae* or Umbellifers as they are better known. This is a very big plant family with well-known members such as carrot, parsnip, parsley, hogweed, most of which have the characteristic flat umbrella flower heads (umbels). All of the common well-known members of the family are also herbaceous, rather than woody plants. *Bupleurum fruticosum* has the characteristic flower shape but unlike almost all others of the family, except for a few species in the tropics, it is a shrub. However, recent botanical scholarship suggests that the Aralia

family which has many shrubs, is so closely related that it could be amalgamated with umbellifers making *B*. *fruticosum* less of an outlier.

Bupleurum fruticosum hails from the Mediterranean region of Europe where it grows in the widespread and characteristic scrub of that region. This gives a clue to its cultural requirements – a well-drained sunny position. As one might also expect from this native origin, it is resistant to drought but not to severe cold, although Thwaite's specimen does not appear to have suffered any significant cold damage since The Friends has been in existence. It is happy on chalk soil too.

The foliage of this shrub is evergreen of slightly uneven, narrow, shiny, faintly blueish leaves and the habit dense and tolerably neat for tidy gardeners as well as of fairly modest size. The plant does not stand out in any way from a distance but on closer inspection has an air of something a bit out of the ordinary. It can be grown in shrubberies in the usual way but it seems to show its best in gravel gardens with an overall 'Mediterranean' look. If necessary it can be pruned readily, even quite hard. To obtain a specimen one would probably need to resort to a specialist nursery as it rarely appears in garden centres.

People might wonder at the strange name "Hare's Ear". This is one of those wonderful, deeply imaginative and poetic wildflower names which abound in our native flora. It has been attached to a small number of rather rare British native wild *Bupleurum* species that are closely related to our shrub. The shape of the narrow leaves of these suggested a hare's ear to people in a long vanished age when intimate knowledge of both was clearly more usual than now. These natives are increasingly rare and localised in Britain but one species has been recorded in fairly recent times in East Yorkshire at the eastern end of the Humber bank. Conversely, *B*. *fruticosum* has appeared naturalised in the wild in a few places like railway embankments in the south of England. Losses and gains, I suppose.

John Killingbeck April 2020

SPRING BUTTERFLIES IN THE GARDEN

Whatever else has been difficult about this lockdown period, the weather at least has mostly been very fine. It has been a good spring for butterflies in the garden, so this article is to give a resumé of those most widely encountered at this time of year. Butterflies are one of the extra pleasures of any garden and I will give a few hints too about how to encourage them.

The very earliest species will be fading from view by now but even so, are worth a mention as many of them will make a reappearance later in the year.

Small Tortoiseshell

SMALL TORTOISESHELL is usually the first one that people notice – bright orange and lively. It usually emerges from hibernation in the first good days of February. This year there have been quite large numbers. I counted almost 20 at once in my own garden in March. They were feeding on winter heather, Chionodoxa, Muscari and Aubrieta flowers mostly and these early flowers are important nectar sources. Also important to any butterfly are food plants for the caterpillars. Tortoiseshells are one of the species which feed on nettles. However, nettles are so common that there is little need to grow them in your own garden.

Comma

Peacock

The PEACOCK, with its striking eye spots follows on very soon after the Tortoiseshell. It has similar habits and requirements to the Tortoiseshell. You might encounter either of these species hibernating in your garage or shed during the winter too – looking like blackened leaves. Do not disturb them even though they choose some really odd spots to hibernate, like plant pots or curtains. Peacocks have also been quite numerous this year. The third nettle butterfly you are likely to see, though less numerous, is the COMMA, looking a bit like the Tortoiseshell but more scalloped in outline. Its caterpillars also feed on hop. I have only seen one RED ADMIRAL (another nettle feeder) this spring. In recent years they have been seen at Thwaite in every month of the year. Numbers might be low because of the awful wet cold weather last autumn when they feed up before hibernation.

A striking very early species is the yellow BRIMSTONE – again may be out in February onwards from hibernation. The females are a paler greenish colour. They are on the wing for a very long period. The old generation almost meets up with the next. Caterpillars feed on Purging and Alder Buckthorns (not Sea Buckthorn). If you can plant either of these shrubs in your garden it may help the Brimstone.

Brimstone

A recent arrival on the scene is the dainty HOLLY BLUE, flitting around shrubs at about eye height. It will lay its eggs on Holly, Ivy and Wild Dogwood (*Cornus sanguinea*). You are far more likely to see this than Common Blue in gardens.

A whole series of white butterflies appear in mid spring. Easiest to spot is the striking ORANGE TIP whose name describes the appearance of the male exactly. Females have no orange, even so can be told from other whites by

their dappled lower under wings. They are particularly fond of crucifer plants and lay their eggs on Ladies Smock, Jack by the Hedge and occasionally Honesty.

Other than the SMALL WHITE which you might not want to encourage into your vegetable garden, the subtle and pretty GREEN VEINED WHITE might be seen. Its food plants are similar to those of Orange Tip, only more diverse. Notice the delicate vein streaks like pencil lines on the wings. The well-known LARGE "Cabbage" WHITE will make an appearance in May. Sometimes despised it is actually a very handsome insect.

Of brown butterflies, the commonest in gardens is SPECKLED WOOD. Once started in April it seems to continue intermittently for the rest of the season. Rarer is WALL BROWN, a vibrant orange/brown with smart eyespots and lively movement. You might be lucky to see it in May. Other browns may appear later in summer. Most browns feed on simple coarse grasses so appreciate untidy gardens very much. As do most butterflies and other wildlife. Dandelions whatever their faults, are one of the very best flowers for spring butterfly nectar.

Small Copper

These are not the only species you may see in spring but are perhaps the most likely. Some of you might also be lucky enough to get the SMALL COPPER – a tiny but dazzlingly orange butterfly. Its larva feeds, particularly, on Sheep's Sorrel in short grass, a not uncommon weed of neglected lawns. If you have such a lawn it is well worth keeping in that condition.

John Killingbeck April 2020

Spring Flowers at Thwaite

Vic as taken some photographs of the spring flowers out at Thwaite at the moment, so you can see them even though you can't get into the grounds just now. He's even taken a picture of a fish that you might recognise!

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