



Autumn Newsletter 2026

Editorial

Barbara Williams, Chair, b_williams15@hotmail.com
All photos taken by the editor unless stated otherwise.

Welcome to our Autumn Newsletter. A different voice for the editorial this time, as Kathy Gray reflects on what has attracted her for so long to the genus *Paeonia*, those beautiful and ever-popular plants.

Beautiful Peonies

If I ever had a National Collection, it would be that of *Paeonia*. I have loved these opulent flowers since I was a child and can remember making 'scent' from the petals of *P. officinalis* growing in our garden. Yes – I know the flowers are over quite quickly, but this genus has much to recommend it. Besides the beautiful flowers, the foliage is often most attractive, from the emerging shoots to autumn colour. The seed pods also offer more interest. Most peonies are hardy and long lived. They flower relatively early in the season and, as a consequence, are not so likely to be affected by drought; indeed they are reasonably drought tolerant – something I have witnessed in my garden during this summer. They prefer to grow in sun, although there are some shade lovers, but they are not too fussy about soil conditions, as long as it is not a waterlogged site.

Peonies suffer from few diseases, but are vulnerable to a fungus – *Botrytis paeoniae*, or peony wilt. Parts of the plant will wilt and, if it gets a hold, parts may turn brown or black and collapse; there may also be a furry grey mould. There are no specific chemical controls, so one should cut out the affected parts down to a healthy bud or, if necessary, to the ground. Do not put the affected parts in the compost as the fungus can survive for some years. The other pest is the larva of the common swift moth, which burrows into the ground to feed on the roots. If your peony is not doing well, it may be worth digging it up to inspect the roots, disposing of any unwelcome visitor; always do this before planting a new plant.

Peonies have a long history, having been used as medicinal plants for at least two thousand years. The ancient Greeks referred to them as the 'Queen of All Herbs' and the Chinese considered the tree peony to be the 'King of Flowers'. Perhaps rather unfairly, they called herbaceous peonies 'The King's Ministers'. The plants were highly valued in medieval times, when their roots and seeds were used extensively to treat a wide range of ailments and, in this country in the nineteenth century, the seeds were still being made into necklaces to ward off evil spirits. Their use in Traditional Chinese Medicine still continues, and although plants are

grown expressly for this market, many wild tree peonies are dug up to satisfy the demand, with obvious consequences for the wild population.



P. mlokosewitschii photo Tony Gray

For many years the genus was included in the family *Ranunculaceae* and allied to plants such as *Aconitum* and *Helleborus*. However, they were placed in their own family, *Paeoniaceae*, in

1830. There are many species of herbaceous peony, with *P. lactiflora* being the source of thousands of different cultivated varieties, such as 'Sarah Bernhardt' and 'Bowl of Beauty'. *P. mlokosewitschii*, or 'Molly the Witch', with its primrose yellow flowers, is surely one of the stars of the garden.

Herbaceous peonies have deep, tuberous roots that act as storage tissues, but should not be set too deeply in the soil as this may inhibit flowering. You can divide herbaceous plants – I have had the best success by waiting until leaf fall starts and then dividing. Tree peonies are, of course, shrubs with woody stems. These include plants such as the stunning *Paeonia rockii*, named after Joseph Rock, a botanist, explorer and plant collector. He found the seeds in 1925 in a monastery garden in Gansu Province, China. Unlike their herbaceous cousins, grafted tree peonies should be planted more deeply, with the graft union covered by at least 10 cm of soil.

In recent years, we have seen the emergence of intersectional peonies, which are hybrid perennials created by crossing herbaceous peonies with tree peonies. They are also known as Itoh peonies in honour of the Japanese breeder Toichi Itoh, who



P. rockii photo Tony Gray

first developed the hybrids in the 1940s. The foliage dies back in the winter, leaving a low, woody framework. The flowers are really quite sumptuous, offer a wider colour range and are produced over a longer period; they do not need staking. Itoh peonies need similar conditions to the



Itoh Peony, *P. 'Dark Eyes'* photo Brian Ellis

seeds should be sown as quickly as possible after they are ripe, to avoid them drying and entering dormancy. You may find a mixture of black and red seeds in the pod – an attractive feature, but the red seeds are sterile. Peonies produce their root before their aerial shoot, so do not give up on seeds just because there is nothing to see. As a guide, fresh seed should produce its first root in the autumn after sowing, with the aerial shoot appearing during the following spring. Older seed may lie dormant for a year and need two periods of chilling before germination is complete. I currently have three peonies I have grown from seed within the garden and they are so beautiful. One I know as a 'Moutan Hybrid', which is, I guess, a form of *P. suffruticosa*, and my absolute favourite; it is beautifully scented.



P. 'Moutan hybrid' photo Tony Gray

So, do not be put off by people saying peonies don't flower for long. There are many that will be beautiful additions to any garden.

Membership Matters

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A warm welcome is extended to the following new members:

Dr Greta Mackenzie (North Elmham) and Mr Jonathan Gunnett (Old Catton) who joined at our May Plant Fair. Dr Alex Beedle (South Wootton) Mr Andrew Gladman (Norwich) who was a member of Cambridgeshire group but has now moved to Norfolk, Dr Sarah Fleming (King's Lynn) and Mrs Ann Lamb (Great Yarmouth).

We had four new members enrol at our recent August Plant Fair: Ms Annie Dellbridge (Thetford); Mrs Patricia Lane (Wymondham); Mr Neal Daniels (Matlaske) and Dr Martin Wilson (Spexhall).

It is with sadness to report that two members have sadly passed away: Mr Graham Allison and Miss Anne Tallowin – both long standing members. Our thoughts are with Sue Allison and her family and Anne's family.

Our membership now totals 203.

Read all about it

National Collections News

New Plant Heritage National Collection in Norfolk

Dr Anne Ashington, PH National Collections Co-ordinator

Norfolk had two new National Collection Proposals approved by the Plant Collections Committee (PCC) at their meeting in June and both were invited to apply for full status.



Exotic Fern Group display, Hethersett 2025

One proposal came from the Exotic Fern Group for a dispersed National Collection of Ferns (Tropical & Subtropical). This large established collection, requiring mainly heated glasshouse conditions, is held predominately across two sites by its

President Dr Peter Blake in Norwich and in Buckinghamshire by fellow principal collector Matthew Reeve. It consists of 665 species spread across 128 genera. The PCC recognized the importance of a collection with such broad generic representation and the work involved to safeguard a significant plant group with many now difficult to import into the UK.

A second proposal came from H.M. Prison, Norwich for a National Collection of Gazania. This will be held in the Category C Gardens at the prison. Gazania are tender herbaceous perennials endemic to South Africa and are usually grown as annuals in the UK. The large daisy-like brightly coloured flowers, ranging from yellow and orange through to red, pink and white, often with contrasting stripes, are produced throughout the summer and are ideal for summer bedding. The collection consists of fourteen cultivars at the moment.

The status of the Gunnera National Collection, held at Natural Surroundings, was upgraded from provisional to full status now that the plants are fully established in their specially constructed bed. The five small leaved species have survived three winters and grown amazingly well to completely fill their allotted spaces. *G. hamiltonii*, with pretty, serrated leaves, has grown vigorously on its sandy section which mimics its natural habitat in New Zealand. Here it is found on damp sand of sparsely vegetated sand dunes. It is now classified as "Threatened – Nationally Critical" and is one of the rarest plants in the country.



Gunnera hamiltonii photo Anne Harrap

RHS Sandringham Flower Show 2026

Barbara Williams, Chair reflects on the experience of RHS Sandringham

Well, it was certainly an experience! And yes, some aspects of the Sandringham show were controversial, not least the high cost to local nurseries and small businesses of renting the spaces, from which we were fortunately exempt as a charity. But in spite of that – the hard work, the networking, the meetings, the mountains of bureaucracy and dealing with the strict requirements of the RHS when it comes to their shows, it was an interesting and exciting experience, to see how it all works, as a participant rather than a visitor.

We received many compliments about our exhibit – designed to showcase our national collections as a garden. The aim was to convey the message that to hold a national collection, you do not necessarily need acres of space, a huge greenhouse and hundreds of different cultivars of a plant. You can “simply” have your national collection as part of your garden. It was truly a great pleasure when visitors said they felt our display represented a garden that they felt could be their garden.

Both members of the public and RHS judges were genuinely surprised that we achieved a silver-gilt medal at our first ever effort. When you matched the plants with our national collections poster, eleven of the thirteen collections provided plants for the garden – not possible for the missing two of *Colchicum* and *Galanthus*! Congratulations to the design and build team of Ian Roofe, Carl Harder and Jon Kelly for achieving that aim in practice – and to the overwhelming number of members, collection holders and nurseries who helped along the way and at the show.



Carl Harder

Carl Harder took the overall leadership role, so when I asked what he remembered most, this is what he said: “All the build-up to the show was hard work and stressful at times, and there were sleepless nights too! But it was fantastic the number of our members who came together to help in so many different capacities. Plant Heritage gave us a lot of advice

(and aprons!) and the RHS were very helpful too. Yes, they made mistakes but they were always willing to help when they could. The week of the show went by so fast and by the end, I was exhausted. It didn't hit me, what we'd achieved, until days after the show. The silver-gilt medal was a fantastic achievement for a first-time appearance at an RHS show.”



Our Sandringham garden

After all the brouhaha, the million-dollar question is would we do it again? This puts me in mind of our great Olympian rower Steve Redgrave. After winning his fourth gold medal at the 1996 Olympics he said: “Anyone who sees me go anywhere near a boat again, ever, you've got my permission to shoot me!” Four years later, he won gold at the Sydney Olympics. Hmmm. A gold medal. Now that really would be something.....

Norfolk Plant Heritage Summer Social – June 2026

Barbara Williams, Chair

We met at the Walled Garden in Little Plumstead. This is the third time, I think, that we have done so and each time has been different. It is exciting to have watched this garden grow and develop over time on these visits. A beautiful glass house has been constructed and is now full of plants for sale and display, more unusual plants are being introduced, e.g. *Staphisagra requienii* and *Dietes iridioides*, and a sculpture has been added to give a focal point of interest in the centre of the garden.



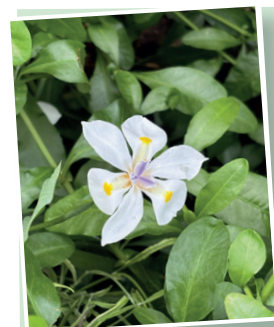
Richard Hobbs starts our tour



Staphisagra requienii

In Summer 2025, we were given the privilege of access to the graveyard next to the garden. There are no headstones, but many of the patients from the hospital were buried there in unmarked graves, and over 140 people have now been identified from the hospital records. Linda Carty, the manager, talked about the distant dream of the garden

taking over the graveyard, and of restoring it, to enable families of those buried there to visit this calm and peaceful place. It didn't seem likely to happen. But in this case, there is a happy ending. In 2026, the owner and developer sold the graveyard to the garden and they will be able to keep and maintain it as a place of rest.



Dietes iridioides

Please let me know your views – we hold this social event every year, and the committee is minded to carry on doing so. The Walled Garden is a lovely venue, with room to park, and all the catering is done for us. There is shelter from rain and sun, and the pleasure of Richard Hobbs, Sally Ward and Linda Carty on hand to talk about the garden and the developments within it.

This is a change from what has happened in previous years, when we would organise the catering ourselves, or ask members to bring a picnic and go to different venues.

We are looking at doing this for 2027. If we revert to that system, or possibly mix and match, then we would need someone who would enjoy taking on this organisational role. I would appreciate hearing your thoughts on this.

Hethersett Plant Fair, August 2026

Barbara Williams, Chair

Although we were all mightily relieved to have some rain before our Plant Fair, it felt a bit close the event itself; but everything worked well in the end and it was actually very good weather for the fair – not too hot, not too cold and not raining! Attendance was in line with previous years (around 600) even though we had done more advertising via social media this time. A small-scale survey, which we did as people arrived, indicated an overwhelming majority of our attendees were returning visitors or had heard by word of mouth. Unsurprisingly, it was a few of the younger visitors who had seen us on social media.

We were pleased to welcome two new nurseries – Palmers and Plants You Don't Need, as well as Bloom and Bailey (vintage garden furniture items) and New Life Tools (vintage tools.)

Programme round-up

Kathy Gray, Programme Secretary, kathygrayc@gmail.com

Another Newsletter and another Programme Round-Up to keep you up-to-date with what we have planned for the coming months. You will also find your event card for 2027 – I'd like to think we have some engaging and knowledgeable speakers booked, along with workshops, walks and garden visits. I do hope you will enjoy the programme.

Sunday, 22nd November at 2pm

Annual Meeting at Bawburgh Village Hall, Stocks Hill, Bawburgh, NR9 3LL. As is our usual practice, this is where we address the formal business of Norfolk Plant Heritage by holding our Annual Meeting. The relevant papers are included with this newsletter. After the AM, we will have a chance to chat and catch up with other members. There will also be one of Linda's entertaining quizzes and we plan to offer wine and soft drinks. Hopefully, there will also be a selection of savoury and sweet refreshments brought along by your good selves, for which we are always grateful.

Sunday, 17th January at 2pm



At the first of our three spring lectures, all at Bawburgh Village Hall, I am very pleased to say that our speaker will be Jack Lindfield, who is, of course, the Head Gardener at

Sandringham House. Some of you will have already met Jack when he has taken us on walks around Sandringham and, of course, it is where there is the Norfolk Snowdrop Collection. The title of the talk is *Sandringham Then and Now* which should give us a new perspective on the house and gardens. There will be plants for sale.

Erigeron karvinskianus

Sunday, 21st February at 2pm

In February we will welcome Sandra Lawrence, author, lecturer and photographer. She is well known for her book about Miss Ellen Willmott, that notable, eccentric horticulturist; indeed, some of you may have heard Sandra speak about her at a Hardy Plant Society meeting. However, less well-known, but equally fascinating, is the



The Conservatory, Warley Place, photo Sandra Lawrence

book she has written about Jacob Maurer, who helped create, and then maintain, the massive alpine garden at Warley Place. The talk is entitled *Miss Willmott's Secret Weapon*. There will be plants for sale.

Sunday, 21st March at 2pm

For our third spring lecture we will welcome Barbara Seagall, who is a garden writer, lecturer, herb specialist and author of 13 books. Her books span subjects such as secret gardens of different areas, why we visit gardens and garden chasing in Japan. However, for our lecture Barbara will talk on *My Desert Island Gardens* when we will be transported from nearby Suffolk to Antarctica via South Africa and other countries. Photo provided Barbara Seagall.



Barbara Seagall

Sunday, 4th April from 11am

Another of our day-long Galas, when the theme will be Woodland Plants. This time we will be welcoming back Jimi Blake, the irrepressible owner of that wonderful garden in County Wicklow, Hunting Brook Gardens. We will also welcome Saul Walker who was Head Gardener at a private garden in Devon for 10 years and is now the Partnership and Events Manager for Plant Heritage. Both will be talking on how to make the most of shade in the garden – something most of us have to contend with. See the enclosed letter for further details and how to book for what promises to be a very special day. Photos provided by Jimi and Saul.



Jimi Blake's Garden



Saul's garden

**Plants are our passion
but people make us successful -
our thanks to all who help and support us.**

Norfolk Plant Heritage

www.norfolkplantheritage.org.uk

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