Helping HEPATICA

Glenn Shapiro's involvement with our Threatened Plants Project has led her to recommend two little plant gems to grow

As the Collection Holder for *Hepatica* (excluding *japonica* cultivars), I spend a lot of time researching which cultivars are currently available and going through old literature. However, when I was asked to analyse the list for *Hepatica* generated by the Threatened Plants Project, nothing had prepared me for the stark realisation that so many cultivars have been lost.

TWO FOR STARTERS

Some in my Collection I did not consider to be at such high risk because they are more numerous and well regarded in their countries of origin and safe with me. Still, many cultivars that were once on show and written about in this country seem to have died out. I can recommend two of my 'threatened' favourites that are still available and that you would enjoy growing.

FOR GARDEN OR POT

Hepatica 'Millstream Merlin' must be on everyone's list of top ten garden hepaticas. Yet if I only had one plant of it, I would have it in a pot, placed where I could see it most frequently while it is in flower. It is always the last to finish flowering with us, in late April. I used to wonder why it was so distinctly different from the others, with its intense violet blue flowers; the lack of stamens (maiden flowers) makes the colour look extra solid.

It was discovered in Millstream Gardens in Connecticut, the garden created by the former president of the American Rock Garden Society, H. Lincoln Foster, and his wife Laura Louise. A spontaneous hybrid of uncertain origin, described as *Hepatica* × *media*; the parents were reputed to be *H. nobilis americana* and *H. transsilvanica*. Recent DNA research on the American species now shows them not to be related to *H. nobilis*, so it may now seem appropriate to drop the '× *media*' designation. Indeed as *H. acutiloba* has a tendency to produce maiden flowers, it may well be that the parentage of *H.* 'Millstream Merlin' is *H. acutiloba* × *H. transsilvanica*. A maiden form of *Hepatica acutiloba* has been exhibited by Diane Clement at some of the AGS shows, and the resemblance between her plant's flowers and those of 'Millstream Merlin' is very striking, so it could be the seed parent. No one can doubt the *H. transsilvanica* pollen parentage regarding the foliage. Whatever the parentage, 'Millstream Merlin' received an A.M. when exhibited in 1989 by the late Kath Dryden. It has since featured in *The Garden, AGS Bulletin, The Plantsman* and on the cover of Edrom Nurseries' catalogue, yet it is now on the threatened list.

HEPATICA × *MEDIA* 'BALLARDII'

Professor Friedrich Hildebrand of Freiburg is credited as the first to deliberately cross *Hepatica nobilis* with *Hepatica transsilvanica* in 1890. In Britain Ernest Ballard in 1916 was first to repeat this cross, now referred to as × *media*. His son Philip Ballard wrote in the AGS Bulletin in the late 1960s explaining that *Hepatica transsilvanica* was the seed parent. 'Several fertile seeds were raised, but due to war-time neglect there was only one survivor. This, when propagated, was sold in his nursery as *H.* 'Trilosa'. Father was very fond of this plant, with its long grey eyelashes, and it was with some sadness that, after many selfings and back-crossings, all abortive, he ruefully pronounced it to be 'another damned mule.'

Ernest Ballard received the Reginald Cory Memorial Cup for it on 8 March 1938, under the new name of *Hepatica* × *media* 'Ballardii' and that same year the plant had a RHS award of merit.

I wonder if 'Ballardii' was ever available in large numbers because it is even slower than most × *media* to bulk up, even though it is very hardy. Although it appears in the RHS Plant Finder it is hardly ever in stock. Certainly by the mid-1940s, in a show report in AGS Bulletin 46 no 4, it was said that, 'Ballardii' has recently become extremely scarce, being a sterile hybrid and not the sort of plant that one would willingly divide'. ❀

Hepatica 'Millstream Merlin'

Hepatica × *media* 'Ballardii'

Hepatica 'Millstream Merlin'

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