



An auricula theatre as part of the Northern Group's display at Harrogate Spring Show. © Terry Mitchell/Northern Group National Primula & Auricula Society.

## The auricula: history and cultivation

Graeme Butler

From its original mountain habitat, among the rock fissures across the European Alps, *Primula auricula* has carved itself a comfortable existence for the last five hundred years in many a British garden. With the early introduction of auricula plants and seeds, consequent hybridisation with *Primula hirsuta* gave rise to one of the oldest and most collectible of garden plants. There is simplicity, coupled with a detailed perfection that has secured it a place in gardens. Hybridisation led to the myriad colours in the show auricula today. The earliest crosses gave plants which, in structure, appear like *P. auricula*, yet sport vivid red, magenta and blackish shades. The resulting hybrid is known as *P. x pubescens*, and it becomes possible to widen the colour range to include yellows and blues, an example of which can be seen in our own hybrid, now named *P. x pubescens* 'Rumbling Bridge'.

### The earliest auriculas

As early as the mid 1600's, both striped and

double auriculas were being developed. Especially highly prized were the forms of striped doubles, some of which were recorded as fetching five to twenty pounds per plant - a fortune for that time. Antique paintings exist, depicting these unrefined, yet beautiful, blooms. The striped auricula started a trend that was to last for 200 years. Although collections were predominantly of striped forms, it was the appearance of the shaded blooms in the early 1700's, later to become known as the alpine section of auriculas, that was the next development. The alpine auriculas, being devoid of 'meal', both in foliage and eye of bloom, became popular outdoor plants. The flowers of alpines are always darkest nearer the eye of the bloom - which may be white or gold - gently shading out to the petal edges, as a lighter version of its given darker colour. Watering is, of course, easier and quicker with the alpines, as there is no 'meal' to be spoiled by careless watering. Nowadays, with the range of colours being so broad, it is no wonder they have their own strong following.



*Primula auricula*, Otlica, Slovenia. © Sidney Clarke.

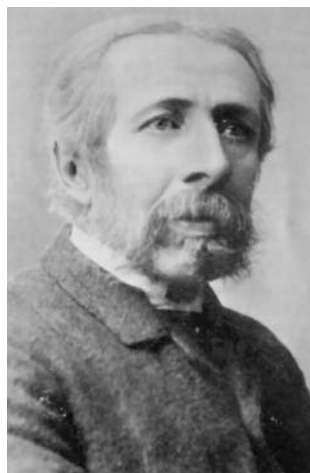


*Primula hirsuta*, Col de la Croix de Fer, Haute Savoie, France. © Sidney Clarke.

### Developments

Around 1750 the first edged auricula appeared. This was an aberration, replacing the usual bloom texture with green leaf tissue, thickly covered in a dense white meal, which masked the green below. So dramatic was this new discovery that edged varieties became

much in demand. In fact, these plants were soon known abroad as English auriculas. Subsequent plants were to show a varying degree of meal covering the 'pips', as the flowers are known. With a thin covering of meal, acting as a veil to the green below, this gives the appearance of a grey edge. Similarly,



FD Horner.



'Howe's Venus' © 1820.



The old Scottish society logo. © Graeme Butler.

Swings in taste affected the plant world of the eighteenth century. With the appearance of edged auriculas in grey, white and green, fanciers started turning their backs on the striped and double flowered varieties, almost to the point of extinction. This trend was to continue for a further two centuries.

In the mid eighteen hundreds, Charles Turner, a nurseryman from Slough, devoted much of his time to introducing new varieties of alpine auriculas, which were becoming very popular in the latter years of the Victorian era. It is worth noting that a plant which is still in existence and winning prizes is the dark plum coloured alpine, 'Argus', first exhibited in 1890, and showing no sign of losing vigour. This makes it one of the oldest auriculas around today.

We cannot overestimate the dedication of the early auricula fanciers. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, standards were being drawn up to define qualities already in place, in keeping with the steady progress being made by growers. Auricula 'theatres', were cropping up around the country, within the grounds of stately homes, with gardeners paid not only to maintain a grand collection, but also to hybridise new and better varieties.

### Stronghold

The finest growers in the country were the descendants of the original Flemish weavers, based in Lancashire, their skills having been passed down from their forefathers, who had been employed in the woollen mills around 1570. Even to this day, the north of England is still the stronghold of auricula fanciers. The cooler air of the north suits the auricula. It is worth noting that the definition of florists, as the early fanciers were known, is, 'one who aims for absolute perfection in a flower, according to an unalterable standard'; a term coined a very long time ago, which, of course, differs from the modern day definition of flower seller.

As florists' societies sprang up over the country during the 1830s, collectors and breeders were developing a taste for competition and camaraderie. This gave a chance to compare, or simply show off, their latest offering. These florist feasts, as they were known, were held in village inns. A copper kettle was hung outside to announce the event, which, in turn, served as a most functional star prize. These antique kettles were part of an old tradition which remains in place at shows today, as they are usually presented as the prize for the six pan auricula class. Judging



'The Caley' bred by Derek Parsons for the RCHS bicentenary in 2009. He also raised 'President George (Anderson)'. © J Watt Russell.



Crown and offset.



Primula x pubescens 'Rumbling Bridge' © G Butler.

### The Scottish Auricula & Primula Society



[www.thescottishauriculaandprimulasociety.com](http://www.thescottishauriculaandprimulasociety.com)

Do come and join this new society that hopes to stimulate and conserve the cultivation of Auriculas and Primulas.

Benefits for members: Yearbook, Exhibit free at any of the society shows. Membership starts at £8.00.

Please visit website for details. Contact our Secretary Dr. Alison Goldie:

[secretary@thescottishauriculaandprimulasociety.com](mailto:secretary@thescottishauriculaandprimulasociety.com)



Two striped types: 'Regency Ginger' and 'Night & Day'. © T Mitchell/ Northern Group National Primula & Auricula Society.

was by consensus, as exhibits were passed around a table for closer examination. True to the event title, the drinking and feasting would start after judging was concluded.

By this time, records show that many of the auricula types had reached a higher level of refinement. By the 1860s, four national auricula shows were held around the country, unaided by any formally organised society. It was not, however, until one great florist, the Rev. F. D. Horner, helped to establish the National Auricula Society, that the first official show was held in 1873. He was, undoubtedly, one of the most important figures of the auricula world, both as a great writer and grower.

### **Auriculas in Scotland**

February 14th, 1887, was a momentous day, when auricula and primula growers gathered at 5, St. Andrews Square, Edinburgh, to discuss the formation of a new Scottish Primula & Auricula Society. Although not a lot is known about the history of auricula growing in Scotland, it is understood that there were quite a few growers spread around the country. The only other opportunity to show auriculas had been at the early Dundee Flower Shows, starting 40 years before. After a successful meeting, it was agreed that the first show would be held on May 4th 1887, at the Calton Convening Rooms, Edinburgh. The show was deemed a great success, with an impressive number of visitors. Also on display were many other varieties of plants, such as pansies, rhododendrons, orchids, ferns and geraniums. The second show, held the

following year, was also very successful, with an increase in attendance, especially from over the border. These included two very important figures of the auricula world: the Rev. F.D. Horner and Ben Simonite, who was possibly the U.K.'s best hybridiser and showman of that time. Both gentlemen brought exhibits with them. It is important to note that, in keeping with the Club's title, the various primula species and polyanthus classes, including the much loved gold-laced varieties, were well represented. Unfortunately, we have no further information about the club after 1893. The one clue we have, however, that proves auriculas were once very popular in Scotland, is the considerable list of plants that bear Scottish place names. St. Boswells, Roxburgh, Gleneagles, Ben Lawers and Glencoe are just a few examples. One of the few commercial auricula growers in the U.K., with a substantial list, was Forbes of Hawick.

### **The new society**

We no longer have to imagine what auricula shows were like in the past as there is now a new Scottish club for all who love these plants. With much hard work and organisation, Alison Goldie and Mark Hutson, of Angusplants in Brechin, resurrected the Scottish Auricula & Primula Society. Being National Collection Holders of alpine auriculas, they were familiar with National Auricula & Primula Society shows south of the border. The Society's first AGM was held on 20th September, 2014, with the first show on 16th May, 2015. This inaugural show, at Auchterarder Church Community Centre,



*'Scorcher' a red self.*



*'Moselle' a green edged show form.*



*'True Briton' a white edged auricula.*



*Show auricula 'Chorister'*



*Alpine auricula 'Dragon's Hoard'.*



*'Stella South' a light centred alpine. © G. Butler and T. Mitchell/ Northern Group National Primula & Auricula Society.*



*Double auricula 'Porcelain' © G Butler.*

attracted a good entry, but visitor numbers were almost overwhelming!

The interest in showing, both of auriculas and other primulas, is on the increase. The society is preparing for its third show, again in Auchterarder, on 20th May, 2017; The National Auricula & Primula Society (Southern group) generously donated the Great Bookham Trophy, a fine, antique copper kettle, dating back to the days of the early shows. This, as in years past, is awarded to the winner of the six pan class.

### **Cultivation**

Each spring, consistent and successful results will be achieved by following a simple routine after flowering. For hundreds of years, division of the entire plant and setting aside all the small, easily detached offsets has guaranteed

the best results. The reason this works so well is because the main crown, which is re-potted back into its 3–3.5” (7–8cm) pot, is now relieved of the burden which the vegetative offsets place on it, thus allowing all the plant’s energy to be directed towards one strong truss. It is only the mature crown which is capable of producing a full-headed truss. For most collectors, the potting up of the small offsets is a welcome insurance policy, guaranteeing safe keeping of highly prized varieties. These smaller plantlets are always re-housed in small thumb pots, 2” (6cm) for fear of over-watering. Auriculas dislike over-potting. The only other task is to make sure that the fine root system is reduced by half, and the main root stock, or ‘carrot’, of the large crown, is cut back to approx. 2” (5cm). The ‘carrot’, perpetually elongates, therefore neglecting to do this creates plants with a ‘palm tree’ effect - seen all too often!

### **Composts**

Potting mixes were fairly diverse many years ago, often containing materials seldom used today, such as crushed oyster shell, rotted, stacked turf, etc. Depending on which part of the country one grows auriculas, it may be necessary to choose a specific blend to suit. For example, in a breezy, fresh, maritime location, more J.I. No. 2 would be added to retain moisture. In an inland, damp and frost prone garden, the humus content should be raised. Auriculas require organic micro-nutrients, released over a long period. The old growers would incorporate plenty of leaf



*'Purple Pip' and 'Pumpkin', both Rumbling Bridge bred doubles. © G Butler*



*Striped auriculas on show.* © T. Mitchell.



*The Bookham kettle with six wining doubles at Auchterarder Show 2015.* © G Butler.

mould and old manure. If it is impossible to acquire leaf mould or quality garden compost, then a reliable multi-purpose would be second best, although a little more perlite may be necessary.

Mix 1 for 3.5" (8cm) plastic or terracotta pots. A 1 litre pot used as a measure in both mixes.

1 measure J.I. No.2; 2 measures leaf mould/garden compost preferably with a small amount old manure added; 1 measure Perlite; 1 level dessert spoon magnesium lime; 2 dessertspoons crushed charcoal

Mix 2 for 3.5" (8cm) terracotta pots.

2 measures J.I. No. 2; 1 measure leaf mould/garden compost; 1 measure Perlite; ½ dessert spoon magnesium lime; 2 dessert spoons crushed charcoal

Auriculas grow perfectly well in plastic pots. Anyone wishing to grow entirely in terracotta will need to be prepared to water more often, in warmer weather. Plants in plastic pots are easier to manage, but one must guard against over watering. Always allow plants to use up their quota before the next watering. If in doubt, judge the weight of the pot before more is given. Never top dress pots with grit, as it deters natural evaporation, and compost must be able to breathe. Auriculas prefer to be under potted, hence a 3.5" (8cm) pot being used for show varieties. The doubles we have raised on the nursery are always divided and repotted

into 4" (9cm) pots, soon after flowering, as their root system develops at a faster rate than edged or show self-varieties. Auriculas should be housed in part shade, usually achieved by covering the well-ventilated structure with shade netting, from March to October. Remove any dead leave to prevent rotting and keep an eye open for the usual insect pests.

The auricula's basic needs are really simple - their biggest demand is that we take enough time to admire them.

*For there is no flower so evocative of the past as the Auricula - and if the modern world is ever to improve out of its present chaos of violence, it could do worse than adapt itself to be suitable, once again, for this most civilised and highly trained of plants.* Sacheverell Sitwell, 1897–1988.

**Graeme Butler, Rumbling Bridge Nursery, Briglands Estate, Kinross, KY13 0PS.**

*Graeme and his wife, Hilary, established Rumbling Bridge Nursery 19 years ago. He is President of the Scottish Auricula & Primula Society. Although an alpine and woodland specialist, he has cultivated auriculas for 27 years, concentrating on the hybridisation of double flowered varieties. The nursery offers a large selection of auriculas, and will have a new auricula theatre in place for spring 2017. Visitors are always welcome, by prior arrangement. Please call 01577 840160, or visit [www.rumblingbridgenursery.co.uk](http://www.rumblingbridgenursery.co.uk) for year round mail order. Also see the Facebook page.*