

# “Raiser unknown”:Eric Smith, a plantsman

**"I always thought Smith was a very odd chap,"** my old friend Bert Hopwood said once, "When you went to the nursery, he never seemed to want to sell you anything," Unusual though such a characteristic might have seemed to a businessman like Bert, it is by no means uncommon among growers motivated solely by a love of plants rather than a desire to make a living from them or indeed the necessity to do so. Few would dispute, however, that, by late 20<sup>th</sup> Century standards, Eric Smith had to be classed as a somewhat unusual character. Another friend summed him up most accurately, when he said "I always feel that, ideally, Eric would have fitted into the court of a medieval patron, someone who could have supplied his modest needs and sheltered him from the realities of life. Every year or so Eric could have come forward to present another new plant, been given a pat on the head and told, 'Well done, Eric, Now off you go and come up with another one,'" Medicean courts are not, however, a feature of modern, western society and those of us who tried to provide a suitable environment for this talented man seemed doomed to failure. Only an outstandingly poor judge of character, as I was in 1964, would have actually decided to go into business with such an unworldly, uncommercial innocent as Eric Smith.

Right: *Agapanthus* 'Blue Moon', an Eric Smith hybrid;  
"Guaranteed to turn me to song" says Bob Brown of [Cotswold Garden Flowers!](#)

I had corresponded with Eric for several years before then, during the time he was propagator in the herbaceous plant department of Hillier's of Winchester. It was through our letters that we had established that we both wanted to start our own specialist nursery and that the extensive collections of plants we both grew at that time were largely complimentary. Eric's hardy perennials and my alpines, together with our mutual interest in a variety of bulbs, provided an extraordinarily wide range of uncommon plants. At that time, there was much conjecture that the rise of the garden centre would mean the annihilation of the specialist nursery.



Although the opposite has proved to be the case, our friends were all concerned as to what we were going to produce for what they called 'bread and butter plants'. Fortunately, neither of us subscribed to the idea that using our time to produce large numbers of easily propagated species was a worthwhile activity and we proceeded with our plan to specialize in those more unusual plants, which appealed personally to both of us. I found a suitable site in a walled garden near Sherborne in Dorset, moved down from Scotland and spent part of 1964 and all of 1965 installing standing areas and generally preparing the ground. I went off plant-hunting in Iran for most of 1966, after Eric was moved from Southampton with most of his plants to start to build up stocks.

# “Raiser unknown”: Eric Smith, a plantsman

We started business in 1967 under the name 'The Plantsmen'. In a search for a suitable name for the business, Eric came up with 'The Plantsman's Nursery' and I suggested abbreviating this. As various permutations of the name are now extant for other businesses and an RHS publication, I think it was a good name and certainly reflected our involvement with the plants themselves rather than gardening in general. It was original at the time and there was a little bristling at our presumptuousness.



© 2011 Steve Matson

*Mitella breweri*, flower, foliage



© 2010 Keir Morse



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*Mitella trifida*, flower, foliage



I remember a somewhat acid letter from Ken Beckett, to whom we had sold a plant from our first list as *Mitella breweri*. He wrote that he considered that the species we had supplied was in fact *Mitella trifida* and added that he thought “plantsmen would have known better.” I think we sent his money back.

Right: *Hypericum capitatum* var. *capitatum* = *Hypericum laeve* f. *rubrum*  
1918 Curtis's Botanical Magazine, London, vol. 144

Nevertheless, although our lists were not particularly remarkable by present-day standards, I think we lived up to our name. Among the more specialized plants, which I was responsible for propagating, species such as the scarlet *Hypericum capitatum* and the pink crucifer *Ricotia davisiana*, to say nothing of a wide range of *Dionysia* and *Oncocyclus* irises, are not just unavailable today but seem to have vanished from cultivation altogether. Most of Eric's hardier perennials have fared better but who today takes the trouble to maintain a range of vegetatively propagated hybrid hellebore clones? Appearances at a few Vincent Square and Chelsea shows, along with personal recommendations, soon established our name among the more specialised gardeners and within a year or so, we had a viable business. My problem was where to go from there.

It was very much my problem as Eric had no wish to involve himself with any aspect of the business except the plants and talking about them to visitors to the nursery. From the start, I was responsible for all the office work, catalogues, packing and shows. As Eric would not agree to manage any employees nor countenance the use of



## “Raiser unknown”: Eric Smith, a plantsman

herbicides on any part of the nursery nor would he have anything to do with machinery, a great deal of the nursery maintenance also fell to me. Eric had decided that we should have stock-beds divided by grass-paths but these remained uncut until after I had returned from Chelsea at the end of May each year.

As anyone who may remember Buckshaw Gardens would testify, the nursery was not the tidiest nor the best organised of places.

An initial resentment towards me, perhaps for stealing their protégé, from the circle of elderly ladies for whom Eric seemed to have a magnetic personality, almost turned to support. One year at Chelsea show, Margery Fish (*left*) came up to and asked "Where is Mr. Smith?"



"He would never come up to London and, in any case, someone has to look after the nursery," I replied.

"Well, I think, he is a very naughty boy, indeed, leaving you to do all this on your own," she said.

Eric could not, however, escape the stress of Chelsea altogether. One year, in the days when people went to Chelsea to buy plants, I had a very fine, very large pan of *Verbascum dumulosum* in the alpine-house, so I used it on our exhibit and came back with several hundred orders for the plant. Eric blanched when he saw the order-books. We had no saleable stock.

"It's alright," I said, "I've brought back the stock plant. I've been counting the rosettes on it all the time I've been selling them. It's no problem to root and it grows quickly. Even if we lose some, we've plenty time to take cuttings off the cuttings." Eric was not reassured and I do not think he slept well all that summer. When we had enough plants to fill all the orders, I think he regarded it as some sort of miracle.



*Verbascum dumulosum* in the Bulgarian garden of S. Silcock and C. Greenwell

## “Raiser unknown”: Eric Smith, a plantsman

As neither improving efficiency of operation nor increasing productivity appealed to Eric, I was left with the sole concept of increasing profitability to keep what was essentially a viable, expanding business operating successfully. I believe we were the first nursery to institute a minimum mail-order requirement, a restriction which almost led to me being attacked at the last Chelsea Show at which we exhibited. I had to attempt to reason with a woman shouting that she thought what we were doing was "Disgusting and catering to the worst possible form of snobbery."

It did, however, drastically trim out the less profitable orders. I stopped exhibiting at shows, an expensive way of acquiring business. We reduced the cost of producing our catalogue, as the plants largely sold themselves. By 1974, however, I had run out of options and could see no alternative to a complete reorganization of the entire production side of the nursery. I persuaded Eric that, while we should retain the specialist mail order trade at much the same level, we needed to realize the potential of many of the herbaceous plants by producing them efficiently in quantity, using micro-propagation methods where appropriate, as container grown stock, and marketing them on a wholesale basis. Eric could continue to produce most of the mail-order plants and concentrate on selecting new clones and hybridizing. We both agreed that 'a new broom' was essential to deal with establishing the new aspect of the business but neither of us for a moment imagined just how drastic the 'clean sweep' would be.

Within months we found we had merged ourselves with another business with heavy concealed liabilities. The entire year's mail-order receipts vanished into a black-hole. With a young family and my house securing the bank loan intended to cover the development of the new project, I had to act decisively. With one director thrown out and Eric falling to pieces, I found myself alone in a mess. I kept the nursery running along on somewhat more realistic lines, as best as I could with virtually no money, from 1975 until 1983 but that is another story unconnected with Eric Smith.

It had rapidly become obvious that Eric had to be provided with a parachute into another safe haven. He had the chance to go to either [Beth Chatto](#) or [Bressingham](#) but, after visiting both nurseries, he thought he would feel uncomfortable in their more commercial environments and decided against them.



Penny Hobhouse (left) at [Hadspen House](#) appeared to provide the ideal circumstances for his survival. He was installed in a delightful cottage on an estate in a beautiful part of Somerset. For a very short time he had the opportunity to grow his plants without any great commercial pressure on him but, once again, a change of the circumstances around him disrupted his life. He returned to live with his brother in the family house in Southampton, which he had left in 1966, and died a few years later.

It would, of course, be wrong to imagine that any impact which Eric might have had on horticulture was restricted to this period of little more than a decade. At least twenty years would be a more accurate length of time over which to review his involvement with plants. When he moved to Dorset, he had already made, in his

# “Raiser unknown”:Eric Smith, a plantsman

Southampton garden, several of the crosses and selections, for which he should be remembered. In the same way, the plants which he named at Hadspen were the legacy of his time at Buckshaw.

His contributions to the development of the two genera *Hosta* and *Helleborus*, neither of which were anywhere near as fashionable in the 1960s as they are today, are rightly the aspects of his work for which he has received most recognition. The most important advances stemmed from only a single cross in each genus, both made in Southampton. I have dealt briefly with Eric's association with *Helleborus* in a contribution to "A Gardener's Guide to Hellebores" and hosta-enthusiasts are more aware than most gardeners of the significance of his work, so I shall not devote as many words to them as they may merit.



*Helleborus x ericsmithii* photos by Brian Ellis and Roma Fiddes

Eric is commemorated in the name *Helleborus x ericsmithii*, under which Brian Mathew described the hybrid *H. niger x H. x sternii*, which Eric was probably the first to make. The cross was actually the result of a failure to produce *H. x nigercors*, a cross which Eric never managed to repeat. Having failed with *H. argutifolius* as a pollen-parent, he tried its hybrid most successfully.

He was also probably the first to cross *H. niger* with *H. lividus*, a hybrid he made at about the same time as the preceding one. I think Rice and Strangman are incorrect in stating the Helen Ballard was "the first person to make this cross." Helen and her husband were regular visitors to the nursery at the time Eric was producing these hybrids. She was very taken with the results and went off not only with some seedlings but with the intention of repeating the cross.



*H. x ballardiae*  
'Pink Frost'  
[left] and

*H. x ericsmithii*  
'Winter's Song'  
[far left]

Photos, Carolyn  
Walker/  
[Carolyn's Shade  
Gardens](http://Carolyn's Shade Gardens)

## “Raiser unknown”: Eric Smith, a plantsman

It is not at all inappropriate that the hybrid should be called *H. x ballardiae*, however, as she grew a very much larger number on to maturity under glass, much more methodically than Eric, selecting, naming and exhibiting specific clones.

We did not consider the tender *H. x ballardiae* (originally labelled by Eric "nigriliv") would ever make a good garden-plant but *H. x ericsmithii* (labelled "nigristern") was generally much hardier and worthwhile in the open garden. I took a representative selection of clones up to an RHS show and the appropriate committee picked one to receive an Award of Merit, subject to it being given a cultivar name.

This we refused to do as we considered it to be a piece of consummate silliness to name a sterile plant which could scarcely be propagated vegetatively. We said we could only countenance the award going to the whole group of hybrids. Chris Brickell countered that, although a suitable method of propagation might not exist now, no-one could know what developments might happen to make this possible in future. I said that we should be pleased to name a single clone when these new methods were proven to exist. The award was withdrawn. After about thirty years we still await the arrival of such suitable propagation techniques. Today, only someone living in a world of fantasy could imagine that they could ever obtain the 'true' original clones of E.B. Anderson's '**Beatrix**', Hilda Davenport-Jones' '**Alabaster**' and '**Hawkhurst**' or Helen Ballard's '**December Dawn**' and '**Midwinter**', all named as single clone cultivars.

I think Eric's hybrids between *Helleborus torquatus* and a plant he grew under the improbable name of *H. 'Colchicus Superbus'* were the more significant innovation. His original clones, such as '**Pluto**', '**Miranda**' and '**Ariel**', which I still grow here in West Wales, do not thrive quite so well in our wetter climate as they did in Dorset but they still remain significant and distinct plants, smaller-flowered and much daintier than most hybrids. Selected seedlings I raised subsequently from them, like '**Titania**'

and '**Zuleika**' are better garden-plants here but no vegetatively propagated clone is going to become widely distributed and grown, using the current methods of propagation.

It is the influence of the selected parent stocks on subsequent generations of seedlings which is really important.



*Helleborus* seedling from 'Cosmos' grown by/photo Tim Ingram

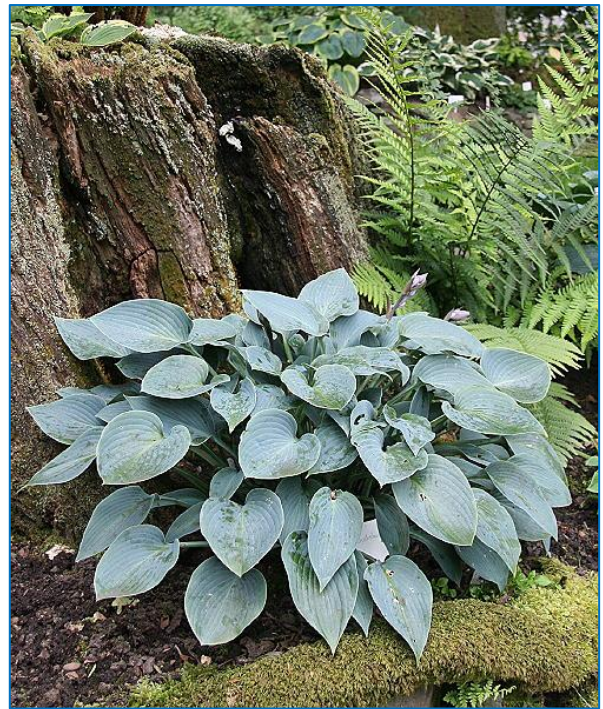
# “Raiser unknown”: Eric Smith, a plantsman

Just as many of Eric's earlier plants were derived from seed from gardeners like Margery Fish, Rita Maxted, Nancy Lindsay and Amy Doncaster, so they will go on to influence future generations of seedlings, along with parents derived from the past selections of Helen Ballard and Elizabeth Strangman, contributing to the continuing work of today's growers, like Will McLewin, Robin White and John Massey.

Nevertheless, many of the clones raised by Eric continue to be not only useful parents but vigorous, worthwhile garden-plants, which have stood the test of time and compare favourably with most seedlings likely to be raised today. While cultivars such as '**Mercury**' and '**Mars**' were poor things and best forgotten, others, named during his period at Buckshaw Gardens, such as '**Sirius**', '**Cosmos**' and '**Aquarius**' remain outstanding.

Right: Hosta 'Buckshaw Blue' photo Ian Scroggy/[BaliHai](#)

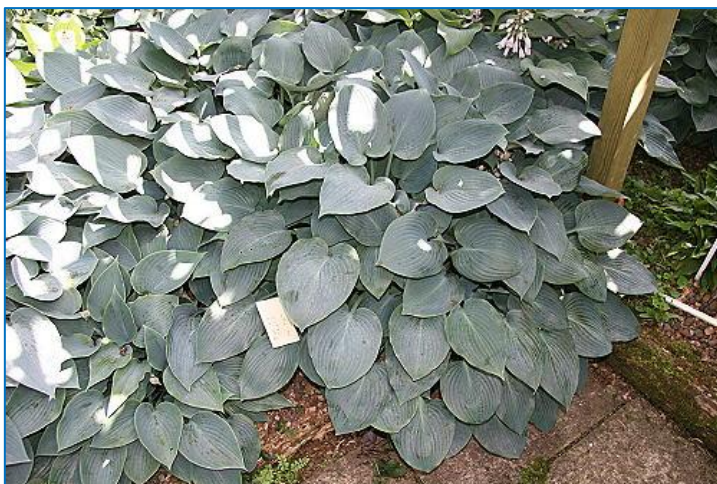
The same could be said of his influence on the genus *Hosta*. Some of his earlier selections [e.g. *Hosta* '**Buckshaw Blue**'] are those which have stood the test of time best in my estimation but I am perhaps not the ideal person to write of his association with this genus, as I never shared his enthusiasm for it in quite the same way as with hellebores. My feelings towards it may reflect the problems with which I was confronted when Eric was raising vast numbers of seedlings. While disposing of large quantities of hellebore hybrids was not a problem at that time, especially when they



had been grown to flowering and could be sorted into colour categories, getting rid of a multitude of mature plants of mediocre *Hosta* seedlings was a nightmare.

Commercially, they should simply have been sprayed with herbicide and ploughed in but Eric was always unwilling to destroy any plant, far less one of his children. I remember insisting that we really had to reduce the dimensions of an extensive stock-bed of *Iris x fulvala*. This appeared to have been done but I subsequently noted

that the excess stock had been 'planted' around the base of the compost-heap.



'Hadspen Hawk' photo [Ian Scroggy](#)

I listed surplus hosta seedlings cheaply under a variety of categories but they never seemed to decrease noticeably. When Eric moved to Hadspen in 1975, he took all the

## “Raiser unknown”: Eric Smith, a plantsman

stocks of his most recent selections with him, clones that were subsequently to bear such names as ['Hadspen White'](#), 'Hadspen Hawk', ['Hadspen Sapphire'](#), 'Hadspen Heron', 'Hadspen Rainbow', ['Hadspen Blue'](#) and a very disconcerting number of other 'blues': ['Blue Danube'](#), 'Blue Dimples', 'Blue Diamond', ['Blue Moon'](#), 'Blue Skies', 'Blue Wave' and maybe many more. I was still left with beds of thousands of rejects to deal with. I brought Eric back on several occasions to review these seedlings at different times of the year. He removed one or two more but finally admitted that he wanted nothing more. My friend Heinz Klose had a further rummage among Eric's rejects and went off with a few (subsequently named by him 'Blaue Venus', 'Blaumeise', 'Blauspecht', 'Irische See' and so on).



*Hosta 'Hadspen Rainbow'* Ian Scroggy

Eric had also given away many seedlings or, more likely, early divisions from his unnamed selections, still under one of his numbers (something like *TF3XS2* for instance). He corresponded with American enthusiasts like Paul Aden ('**Bright Glow**' came from Eric, I believe) and Alex Summers ('**Blue Wedgewood**' was Eric's) and was obviously in touch with many in Britain, like Dave and Julie Morss ('**Blue Belle**' and '**Blue Blush**') and Ann and Roger Bowden ('['Devon Blue'](#)').

I suspect some clones might have been named twice, if not by others then by him. I found this was certainly the case with some hellebores.



A few years after Eric's death, Roger Bowden said to me "We're trying to put all Eric's hosta seedlings together again."

I replied "Really. You'll have a bit of a job on your hands." and thought that it was a pity that I had not known of his intentions when I had several thousand of them to get rid of. I may be wrong but I think I detected a note of reproach in his voice.

*Hosta 'Snowden'* photo © Ian Scroggy

I fear that my attitude will never be received sympathetically by those many plant-enthusiasts who rejoice in a multiplicity of cultivar names. I have never seen any point in naming very similar clones. The dichotomy of attitudes really lies in the fact that those very close to a group of plants see minor differences as much more



# “Raiser unknown”: Eric Smith, a plantsman

substantial than a more detached observer. The extreme case is perhaps the snowdrop-enthusiast but the hosta-enthusiast is not far behind.

Just as Eric named too many similar spotted hellebores so, I think, he named too many medium-sized blue *Hostas* but no doubt many would disagree with me strongly. The fact that I must have exercised a severely restricting influence on his naming activities while at Buckshaw is borne out by the sudden proliferation of names when he went off to pastures new at Hadspen.



*Hosta* 'Pastures New' © [Plants Galore](#)



*Hosta* 'Eric Smith' photo © [Bob Axmear](#)

While we grow quite a number of Eric's *Hostas* in Wales, we have few of the ones he named later in life. We do indeed have his low-growing *H. nakaiana* hybrid 'Pastures New', a pleasant enough plant remarkably similar in habit and foliage, if not in flower, to a clone Eric gave me a year or so after he moved to Hadspen. This came to me only under a number with the comment that he considered it to be one of the best and potentially most commercial of his newer selections. He told me that I had the entire stock, about twenty or so plants. After he died, I registered it as 'Eric Smith' in deference to his estimation of the clone. I do not think it really as worthy of his name as it should be.



*Hosta* 'Snowden'  
photo [Gavin McNaughton/MacPlants](#)

From my own viewpoint, looking at his hostas as a gardener rather than a collector, there are two superlative clones named at Buckshaw. The white-flowered 'Snowden', which I actually originally selected, as Eric could not make his mind up between three very similar seedlings, is as outstanding among the larger ones as 'Krossa Regal' and of similar qualities, if you have space for it.

## “Raiser unknown”: Eric Smith, a plantsman

The blue-leaved '**Halcyon**' was selected after much mutual deliberation, a decision reinforced by *Hosta* trials at Wisley. It was one of five seedlings raised from Eric's historic cross between *H. tardiflora* and *H. sieboldiana*, which gave rise, in subsequent generations, to the numerous 'blues'. The five were all surprisingly similar but there was eventually no doubt that '**Halcyon**' was the best. I believe attempts have been made to locate the other seedlings (and, for all I know, name them). After the years we spent on evaluating the plants, I fail to understand this obsession with the second-rate discards and rejects.

[Note: [Eric Smith 1917-1986: list of hostas named](#)]



*Hosta* 'Halcyon' photo Ian Scroggy/[Bali-Hai Nursery](#)

Perhaps fortunately, although we grew what was a wide range for the time, the genus *Geranium*, which also seems now to encompass far more named clones than there



are distinct and good garden-plants, was not so much in vogue during Eric's time as it is today. As it was, he was responsible for only one named clone, an exquisite little plant, which seems sadly to have vanished from cultivation. This was a back-cross Eric made between *G. cinereum* subsp. *subcaulescens* and the *G. argenteum* hybrid *G. x lindavicum* 'Lissadell'. There were several seedlings and I named the one we thought to be the best '**Gypsy**'. In this case, I regret we did not name some others, as another might have proved more persistent, but perhaps they would all have inherited the recalcitrance of *Geranium argenteum*.

Left: *Geranium x lindavicum* 'Gypsy' ©RHS – Award of Garden Merit 2006

Many of the plants named at Buckshaw were not the results of intentional crosses and simply occurred as self-sown seedlings. Eric had

## “Raiser unknown”:Eric Smith, a plantsman

already found a self-sown hybrid of *Verbascum spinosum*, while at Hillier's. Harold Hillier had named it somewhat uninspiringly 'Golden Bush'. I do not think it is still around though it was a worthwhile plant but not so likely to appeal to the alpine-house grower as Ken Aslet's 'Letitia', which is both more compact and showier.

At Buckshaw, he found a self-sown seedling near *Sedum* 'Ruby Glow', which appeared to have crossed with *Sedum telephium* subsp. *maximum* 'Atropurpureum'. Eric called this '[Sunset Cloud](#)' and I am glad to say it is still in commerce. Joe Elliott's 'Vera Jameson' of similar qualities appeared about the same time but the two are sufficiently distinct to ensure the survival of both.



[Euphorbia polychroma 'Midas'](#) © 2012 Oak Leaf Gardening (above and below right)

*Euphorbia polychroma* 'Midas' was another Buckshaw selection from self-sown seedlings which is still maintained by a few growers.



(Note: this plant, above left, is in the [National Collection of Euphorbia](#), kept by Don Witton in Sheffield, who says this cultivar is his favourite.)

# “Raiser unknown”: Eric Smith, a plantsman

I am not sure whether his white form of *Crocus tommasinianus* was a self-sown seedling from his Southampton garden or the result of a deliberate attempt to produce a white 'tommy', as he already had a few corms of it, when he moved to Dorset, as *C. t.* 'Albus'. I doubt if it is actually pure *C. tommasinianus* and suspect there is some *C. vernus* influence. I named it 'Eric Smith' despite protestations from the self-effacing Eric. Unfortunately, it is not very vigorous and it has dwindled outside in the cold, wet clay of our present garden but it is still offered periodically by specialist bulb-growers. [Note – see photo page 15]



[Brunnera macrophylla 'Hadspen Cream'](#) [Jessica Friedland photos](#)



Left: *Brunnera macrophylla* 'Hadspen Cream' [Gavin McNaughton/MacPlants](#)



Right: *Symphytum* 'Goldsmith' [Bob Brown/CGF](#)

The two variegated plants for which Eric should be best remembered also both just 'happened' at Buckshaw but it was due to his perseverance that the variegation was developed and fixed. I must admit that I was inclined to dismiss the initial variegation on both *Brunnera macrophylla* 'Hadspen Cream' and *Symphytum* 'Goldsmith' as an insignificant virus infection, when Eric showed me the first little streaks of yellow on single leaves of single shoots. Within a few years, however, by selection of increasingly variegated divisions he had not only developed the variegation into a neat zone but more or less stabilized it. Stephen Taffler, Oliver Dawson and I wanted

## “Raiser unknown”: Eric Smith, a plantsman

to call the *Brunnera* 'Eric's Cream' to stand alongside 'Dawson's White', which at that time circulated as *B. m.* 'Variegata', but 'Hadspen Cream' is the name which has stuck. My name for the *Symphytum*, however, is the one which has persisted, so at least the Smith who forged it is commemorated in that.

These two plants are now well established and widely grown but not all his attempts at selecting variegations were so successful. *Agapanthus* 'Golden Rule', a variegated 'Headbourne Hybrid' or perhaps pure *A. campanulatus*, has never really settled down and can almost lose its gold lines when disturbed but it is still around and it can be effective when established. Others simply failed to develop or self-destructed. The most remarkable instance of the latter was a *Hosta* seedling which Eric noticed had the merest hair-like streak of white along the edge of one leaf. Within a year or so Eric had moved this to the centre, where it expanded until the leaves were indistinguishable from those of *Hosta undulata* var. *undulata*. Another year or so on and the leaves were almost completely white, whereupon the stock simply died. His variegated selection 'Emerald Isle' was more successful and we listed it for a few years but it does not seem to have become widely established.



*Anemone hupehensis* 'Hadspen Abundance'

Eric's eye for a good garden-plant, while not infallible, has often been proved much more reliable than my own.

We grew the clone of *Anemone hupehensis*, which he later called

'Hadspen Abundance', for quite a few years at Buckshaw. I did not regard it as particularly worthwhile and discouraged him from working up a saleable stock. My estimation of the plant's worth was obviously far out, as it has since received an

Award of Garden Merit and is very widely grown. I still cannot, however, appreciate the qualities he saw in his, to me, rather ordinary purple hellebore 'Electra' nor indeed in the hosta of which he thought highly and which now bears his name.

It will probably be obvious by now that the selection of most of the cultivars distributed from Buckshaw Gardens was very much a shared process. A walk round the plants to jointly review the day's developments became obligatory and often took an hour or so. Of course, it was a pleasant activity but it could be frustrating when there was a lot of packing or other pressing work to be done.

The selection of names too was the result of mutual discussion. It can generally be assumed that those which reflect Eric's other enthusiasms, astronomy and meteorology, are his choice. Hence, the galaxies and constellations of hellebores, as

## “Raiser unknown”: Eric Smith, a plantsman

well as such names as 'Sunrise' 'Blue Moon' and so on, are Eric's. Others, such as 'Gypsy', 'Midas', 'Golden Rule', 'Red Herald' and so on, are mine.

While Eric was very much the hands-on innovator when it came to selecting seed-parents and dabbling with his pollen-brush, we had a satisfactorily symbiotic relationship when it concerned the plants in general. I may well have given the impression that other aspects of our characters were very different. They were in some respects but we had many similarities as well. For an apparently mild man, he could be imbued with much righteous indignation, particularly when it came to dealing with bureaucracy. I remember him becoming particularly angry because the television licensing authority had demanded that he sign a declaration stating that he did not own a television receiver (which he certainly did not). "Throw it in the wastepaper basket, Eric," I said but he insisted on writing an irate letter. One day I came out to the nursery to find Eric's hackles raised. "I've had this dreadful, retired army-chap from some National Trust garden or other here," he said. "He wanted a blue *Eremurus*. I told him that there weren't any blue *Eremurus* but he started arguing with me and insisting that he'd seen one. I said to him that what he'd seen was probably a *Camassia* or a *Delphinium* but he got quite nasty and said he would go somewhere else to get one. I told him the only way he'd get a blue *Eremurus* was to paint one blue. Not our sort of customer at all."

That exquisitely succinct phrase "not our sort of customer" lives on and my wife and I have occasion to use it from time to time. Of course, we were elitist. I have never seen anything at all wrong with elitism. Snobbery is an entirely different characteristic. Neither of us ever had any time for arrogance, especially when coupled with ignorance, as it usually is, nor were we inclined to indulge in self-promotion to ingratiate ourselves to the horticultural establishment. No doubt this is partly responsible for the fact that his work appears to be under-appreciated. Its significance is however, recognized internationally by the more knowledgeable specialists in the genera with which he was involved. I think this is all he would have wished for.



Left: *Bergenia* 'Beethoven'

Far left: *Bergenia* 'Britten' AGM

Photos Bob Brown/[Cotswold Garden Flowers](http://Cotswold Garden Flowers)

Eric's [hybrids of \*Bergenia\*](#) have certainly not had the recognition they merit but this is more likely to be because the genus is currently less fashionable than *Helleborus* and *Hosta*.

These resulted from using the very dwarf, leathery-leaved *B. stracheyi*

'Alba' as a seed-parent. Their dark, thick-textured foliage remains in extremely good condition all winter and they flower profusely. I rate them very highly as garden-

## “Raiser unknown”: Eric Smith, a plantsman

plants and grow all the cultivars. In our Welsh garden, the flowers do not always open in so immaculate a white as they did in Dorset, though they all always aged to apple-blossom pink shades as they matured. I think how early they do this may depend on temperature and humidity.



*Bergenia* 'Bach' and *Bergenia* 'Eric Smith' AGM photos Bob Brown/CGF.

[*B.* 'Eric Smith' [was introduced by Beth Chatto in the 1970s](#) who named it after her friend Eric, who raised it.]



Below: *Crocus tommasinianus* 'Eric Smith' photo Mark Smyth [page 12]



Left: Jim Archibald, with his hybrid *Bergenia* 'Bartok', photographed by Bob Brown

Eric had selected about four clones and we grew them alongside each other for several years. After a little arm-twisting he decided to name two, '**Brahms**' and

## “Raiser unknown”:Eric Smith, a plantsman

'**Beethoven**', after his two favourite composers. After a few years I named another of his seedlings '**Bach**' and then to keep the theme of composers beginning with 'B'; '**Britten**', although Britten's music was not really to Eric's taste. These are all white-flowered hybrids of *B. stracheyi*, similar in general qualities but some with green calyces and some with pink ones. The considerable spread in flowering time alone justifies growing all of them. The two red-flowered hybrids I named much later, '**Bizet**', '**Borodin**' and '**Bartok**', had nothing to do with Eric's hybrids and were selected from a large number of seedlings which I had raised myself from *Bergenia* '**Ballawley**'.

Some of the best plants we selected at Buckshaw were extracted from such extensive hatches of seedlings. Occasionally natural hybrids would occur. *Rodgersia* '**Parasol**' came out of a bed of *R. aesculifolia* seedlings. This had obviously resulted from hybridization with *R. podophylla* and we listed it for some years simply as a *R. aesculifolia* hybrid. I put the cultivar name '**Parasol**' on it, when we were selling herbaceous plants wholesale after Eric had moved to Hadspen. We have a large patch of it in our garden in Wales and it is as fine a foliage plant as any other *Rodgersia*, as well as being distinct. Another plant which I named but which we do not have in our garden, although I am always meaning to obtain it again, occurred in the same way. This is *Rheum* '**Ace of Hearts**', a plant which I see periodically on television, as it seems to have become popular with garden-designers. We had obtained a stock of *Rheum kialense* from seed from Uppsala Botanic Garden. These had come quite evenly but when we raised a further batch from our own seed, it was obvious that several had crossed with a red-leaved form of *Rheum palmatum*. '**Ace of Hearts**' was what we thought to be the best of these. It is a fine thing but I am still surprised that it has achieved even the small degree of popularity that it has.



*Rheum* 'Ace of Hearts' by Jessica Friedland for [Digging Dog Nursey](#)



and Bob Brown of [CGF](#)

I think our selected clones of *Rheum palmatum* are much more spectacular but they do need much more space. *R. palmatum* '**Red Herald**' was selected as having the



## “Raiser unknown”: Eric Smith, a plantsman

best, red spring foliage among a large number of seedlings from what is grown as *R. p.* 'Atrosanguineum' or 'Bowles' Crimson'. I saw a fine group of the genuine clone at The Garden House at Buckland Monachorum last spring and we have a good planting of it in our garden. I think our green-leaved but red-flowered clone 'Green Knight' is the better all round garden-plant here, however.



Rheum 'Red Herald' Bob Brown/CGF

Another selected seedling which we grow in some quantity in Wales is *Camassia* 'Electra'. Our damp, heavy, acid soil is much to its liking and it is certainly by far the finest, pale-blue clone I have seen.

It occurred in a large batch of seedlings from the deep blue *C. leichtlinii* subsp. *suksdorffii* (merged under the all-encompassing *C. quamash* in the latest account of the genus) but was not only taller, sturdier, much larger flowered and with a denser spike than its parent but of a beautiful shade of electric blue shot with violet.



Right: *Camassia* 'Electra' photo Bob Brown/CGF

Below: *Crocosmia* 'Flamenco' photo Mark Fox/[The Crocosmia Gardens](#)



Our selected cultivar of *Crococsmia masonorum*, 'Flamenco', was the most richly coloured from among several hundred seedlings but I think we needed to have taken the selection process one or two generations further to come up with a truly outstanding deep-coloured clone. We started to select in the opposite direction to produce a good yellow but this project never reached fruition.

# “Raiser unknown”:Eric Smith, a plantsman

*Schizostylis* 'Sunrise' [now known as *Hesperantha coccinea* 'Sunrise' – given Award of Garden Merit 1993]



The pink-flowered *Schizostylis* (a genus placed under *Hesperantha* in another recent revision, incidentally), which Eric called '**Sunrise**' was also the result of a deliberate exercise to produce a high quality pink clone. At the time, there was only somewhat tender '**Mrs. Hegarty**' and '**Viscountess Byng**', late and hardy but with miserable flowers. We grew on a very large batch of seedlings from the clone we grew as *S. coccinea* '**Major**' (possibly pollinated by '**Mrs. Hegarty**') and had a good number of excellent pinks. The best red we selected I named '**Cardinal**' after considerable prevarication as it was only very marginally better than its parent.



'**Sunrise**' was finally selected as the best pink after several years assessment and, although I grow most, more recently named pink cultivars, I still think it is the best here in Wales, so I was rather surprised it was only Highly Commended in the recent Wisley trial of this genus. Though these trials are a worthwhile exercise, it should not be forgotten that they only indicate a clone which has performed well in the particular climate and on the particular sandy soil of a minute portion of the British Isles.

Photo Bob Brown/CGF

## “Raiser unknown”:Eric Smith, a plantsman



*Pulmonaria rubra* 'Redstart' photo Daniel Mosquin/[Botany Photo of the Day](#)

One plant from Buckshaw which did receive an Award of Merit at an earlier trial was the form of *Pulmonaria rubra*, which I named '**Redstart**'. There is no credit to either Eric or myself as far as this is concerned, as it simply happened to be the clone we grew at Buckshaw, which happened to perform rather better than others submitted for trial and needed a cultivar name for the validation of the award.



Our pale blue *Agapanthus* '**Blue Moon**', raised from a grand-parent which had been treated with colchicine at the John Innes Institute, was again only Highly Commended at the Wisley trials but I can recommend it as possibly the best pale-blue, if you can find it today. In this colour, a clone submitted by Lewis Palmer certainly had marginally more impact and deservedly gained an A.M. but unfortunately, when the trial-stocks came to be lifted, they were all hopelessly muddled. Palmer had died and his original collection was also in chaos so there was no way of sorting them out. By default, '**Blue Moon**' may still be as good as you can get.

[Note: *Agapanthus* 'Blue Moon' has been chosen by Plant Heritage (N.C.C.P.G) as a Heritage Plant]

## “Raiser unknown”:Eric Smith, a plantsman

Another tragedy befell the Wisley trials of *Kniphofia*, at a time when we had precious little of the best clones, which had only recently selected and were only just starting to work up into saleable stocks. Apparently the presence of some pernicious pathogen was diagnosed and we were informed that the trials were going to be discontinued and all the plants destroyed. We could not even get the stock we had donated back again. Eric's *Kniphofia* hybrids were once again all derived from a single cross between the cream '**Maid of Orleans**' and massive '**Prince Igor**', perhaps the finest of the larger cultivars, originally from Prichard's of Christchurch. Some superlative seedlings resulted. Of course, after the half dozen or so we thought to be the finest had been extracted, I had hundreds of other very fine plants to dispose of. A large percentage fell into two colour categories which I listed as '**Lemon Cream Strain**' and '**Strawberry Cream Strain**'. The latter name predated Beth Chatto's excellent, much dwarfer clone '**Strawberries and Cream**' but covered plants of similar colouring. The names were derived very simply from the loop-lock labels which Eric fixed on the stems when they were in flower: "lemon/cream" signifying cream flowers opening from lemon-yellow buds. As Eric did not come up with any ideas, I suggested naming the selected clones after butterflies. I cannot remember how many were sent to the aborted Wisley trial but there was certainly '**Red Admiral**', '**Painted Lady**' and, I hate to admit it, '**Brimstone**', a name which had already been used for a *Kniphofia* cultivar. There may well be two '**Brimstones**' flying out there.



*Kniphofia* 'Painted Lady' [Gavin McNaughton/MacPlants](#)



*Kniphofia* 'Brimstone' [Bob Brown/CGF](#)

In the days before 'Index Hortensis', 'The Plant Finder' and national collections, it was not always easy to find out if a cultivar name had already been used, especially when there was no registration authority for a genus. We were just in the middle of

## “Raiser unknown”:Eric Smith, a plantsman

working up stocks of these *Kniphofia* hybrids, when our great disruption of 1975 occurred. Eric, increasingly focussed on *Hosta*, seemed uninterested in continuing to develop these at Hadspen. Though I had given a set of the best ones to a grower in Devon, I subsequently lost most of the small residual stocks when a severe winter occurred during a period of reorganization. As far as I know, only amber and cream 'Painted Lady' survives. There an excellent photograph of it in Phillips and Rix 'Perennials' Vol. 2. No indication is given regarding its origin. This is not surprising as some years later, when I was delivering the weekly load of container-grown stock to the Plant Centre at Wisley and took a walk round the gardens, I was drawn to some fine clumps of *Kniphofia* in flower.

Obviously the residue of the trial stock had not all been destroyed after all, as there was 'Painted Lady', correctly labelled but with the indelibly engraved comment "RAISER UNKNOWN".

JIM ARCHIBALD, 2000



Kniphofia 'Painted Lady' at Wisley, photo Paul Cumbleton