Horticultural HEROINES

Meet the modern-day plant hunters who are preserving plant species for future generations

Our passion for plant-hunting took off in Victorian times, when plant collectors were like the Indiana Joneses of the botanical world, journeying to far-flung corners of the globe on quests to bring home new plant species. Among these horticultural hunters was the trailblazing artist Marianne North, who, in 1871, embarked on several solo expeditions to countries such as Brazil and Borneo, to paint more than 900 plant species.

Today's plant hunters are just as passionate, but they track down elusive specimens via plant swaps and specialist nurseries, keeping often-rare specimens in spare rooms and conservatories. These women all have National Plant Collections and are saving plant species that will be invaluable for future generations to enjoy.









ADDICTED TO AEONIUMS

Mellie Lewis is a self-confessed 'Aeonium addict' who lives in Shropshire with her husband. Her collection began with a single abandoned plant; she now has over 200 different varieties.

I was a shy child and spent my school breaks in the library, head buried in a book on British flora. That's when my interest in plants started, though I didn't get my first Aeonium till 30 years ago, when I was 28.

At the time, I was working part-time as a nurse and part-time in a local woodland garden, where I found an Aeonium thrown on the compost heap. It was an unusual plant then, and it captured my imagination, reminding me of something from the time of the dinosaurs. I rescued it and tried to find out all I could about the species.

Over the years, I collected more varieties and, in 2019, my Aeoniums were registered as a National Plant Collection. I now have more than 200 plants in two greenhouses, two sheds, a conservatory, the porch and every windowsill in our cottage!

In 2018, inspired by my heroine, the plant hunter Marianne North, I decided to visit all seven of the Canary Islands where Aeoniums grow wild. They're also found in East Africa and Yemen, but it's too dangerous to go there. So far, I've travelled to three islands, photographing and cataloguing what I found. Sadly, Aeoniums are threatened by habitat loss and climate change. On my last visit, locals told me that the rains hadn't come, and the plants I saw were shrivelled and stressed.

Although it can be expensive (some cultivars cost £100), collecting gives me huge joy and I get so excited when I discover a new variety that I often burst into tears. My husband is very understanding, but he does roll his eyes when another box arrives with yet more plants!





'It's all about sharing the beauty and history of these plants'

INSPIRED BY IRISES

Lucy Skellorn, a researcher, lives in Suffolk with her husband and their three children. In 2016 she began collecting rare irises bred by her great-great-grandfather, Sir Michael Foster.

I moved from London to my native Suffolk 10 years ago, and retrained in horticulture. One day, I went to a talk given by Sarah Cook, collector of irises bred by Cedric Morris. I asked her if she knew anything about my great-great-grandfather, who I knew was 'big in irises'. She replied, excitedly, 'You do know he's the father of iris breeding?' That got me thinking that it would be fun to track down the irises that he bred.

Sarah gave me a variety called 'Blue Boy' and, over the next few years, I tracked down another 12 from botanic gardens and collectors around the world. I have to check that the plants I receive are what I think they are, which means poring through catalogue descriptions and iris yearbooks – it's a welcome retreat from my day-to-day.

For me, it's all about sharing the beauty and history of these plants, which are the parents of all the iris cultivars that have come since. People are surprised at how scented they are, as fragrance has been bred out of modern cultivars. The greatest pleasure is meeting people at plant fairs where I sell my irises. They're so delighted to hear the stories behind the plants – such as how Sir Michael named two varieties after the daughters-in-law of his friend, Charles Darwin. Then they take that plant, along with its history, back to their own gardens. That's really special. >>





HOOKED ON SPIDER PLANTS

Self-employed gardener Mercy Morris, 54, lives in Herne Bay, Kent, with her cat Baldrick. Her many houseplants include more than 100 spider plants.

I've been obsessed with houseplants since my early 20s. Around 10 years ago, I saw a plain green spider plant at a friend's house – until then, I didn't realise there was more than one type. I started looking for different varieties at garden centres and nurseries. eBay is another source, but you often get plants that aren't quite as they were advertised. Identification can be tricky as the leaves change colour according to the amount of light they get.



I've also swapped plants with other enthusiasts in Europe, but getting plants from abroad is challenging. They often sit at customs for days or weeks while the paperwork is sorted – so you end up with a box of crispy, dried-out specimens!

The most I've paid for a spider plant is £7.99 – they're easy to propagate and plant people are so lovely they usually give them to me for free. I feel my collection is helping conservation by keeping a pool of genetic material, as well as raising awareness of the different varieties out there.

Last year, my spider plants were registered as a National Plant Collection, with 20 different types, though with duplicates, that amounts to nearly 100 plants (squeezed in among another 200 or so other houseplants!). They're all over the house, in a small heated greenhouse and a polytunnel. Their care can be time-consuming, from watering to making sure they have enough space. I also have to keep them safe from Baldrick, who likes to chomp them! But they're so pleasing to the eye – I often find myself looking at them, thinking, 'Oh yes, you're brilliant!'



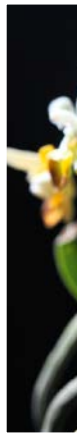


OBSESSED WITH ORCHIDS

Beth Otway, 45, is a freelance writer. She and her husband share their Surrey home with more than 300 miniature orchids.

When I was younger, I always hoped that I'd set up a collection of meadow flowers or snowdrops, as I assumed I'd have a much larger garden. I've not had the money or space to indulge this dream, but I still have a passion to help plant conservation, so instead, I turned my thoughts to growing plants indoors. I am a terrarium specialist, so around seven years ago, I began growing a collection of beautiful miniature orchids in terrariums.

Most people are familiar with moth orchids (*Phalaenopsis*) as houseplants, hybrids bred to thrive as indoor plants. I grow the wild miniature species from rainforests in Asia. These fascinating and fragile plants are becoming more rare, as a result of logging and farming. I buy my plants from specialist orchid nurseries all over the world and keep them in terrariums, vases, bowls and glass bottles around my



WORDS: CHRIS MORLEY. PHOTOS: BETH OTWAY, HELEN BROWN, MARK OTWAY, MELLIE LEWIS, MERCY MORRIS, PLANT HERITAGE, WILLIAM SKELLORN







PASSIONATE ABOUT PEPEROMIA

Former dentist Sally Williams collects Peperomia, and has more than 1,500 plants in the Peak District farmhouse she shares with her husband and son.

From the moment I first saw a Peperomia, aged about 12, I was fascinated by these little plants that didn't look like anything else I had ever seen, and begged my parents to buy me one. The more I collected, the more I wanted to find out more about them. I've recently completed a Master's in research about Peperomia at the University of Sheffield.

Dating from the time of the dinosaurs, and growing in tropical regions, they evolved variations in their leaves so they could grow in a range of habitats. Captain Bligh (of *HMS Bounty*) brought some back from his travels, and they've been grown as houseplants for a couple of hundred years now. They were known as stove plants, as they needed a heated room.

Peperomia are sold in supermarkets, but I concentrate on the rarer ones, which I get from specialist nurseries. Some of them need special conditions, like extra lighting or cold spells over winter. Fortunately, they aren't as popular as some plants, so I don't spend much adding to my collection. Having all these plants indoors does take up a lot of space – I have one room filled with them floor to ceiling, and when my boys were younger, there was barely room for their plates on the kitchen table.

Now that my family are growing up, I have been able to travel to see Peperomia growing in the wild, from the Amazon rainforest to hiking up to Machu Picchu. I'm still always looking for new varieties, though the first one I got is still one of my favourites.



'I have one room filled with plants from floor to ceiling'



home on windowsills, tables, wherever there's space. It can be a problem when friends come round, especially if they have children, as we have to move all the terrariums upstairs!

Initially, Mark didn't share my passion, but he knows how much it means to me and is really supportive. For me, my orchid collection is all about conservation – I share photographs of my plants' flowering online and I propagate my orchids to produce seed and plants for Kew Gardens. They give me such pleasure – it's such a thrill when I get one to set seed!

✣ National Plant Collections are accredited by Plant Heritage, which is a charity devoted to conserving garden plants and houseplants. Find out more at plantheritage.org.uk