



Plant Heritage was set up by a group of passionate plant lovers in the 1970s, many of whom have remained involved over the years, while new members have shaped the charity into the thriving organisation of today. In 2020 Plant Heritage celebrated its 42nd anniversary. We have achieved a great deal during these decades.

Formerly known as the National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens (NCCPG), we adopted the name of Plant Heritage in 2009 as a punchier title that still reflects our purpose.

We were founded as a registered charity in 1978 to combine the talents of botanists, horticulturalists and conservationists with the help of keen amateur and professional gardeners, all of whom are dedicated to fulfilling Plant Heritage's aims.

Through our membership, the National Collection® Holders and Plant Guardian® Scheme, we seek to rediscover and reintroduce cultivated plants into popular use by encouraging their propagation and distribution, so that they are grown as widely as possible. We work closely with other conservation bodies as well as botanic gardens, National Trust, The National Trust for Scotland, English Heritage, The Royal Horticultural Society and many specialist horticultural societies.

A brief history

Concern about the loss of plant variety within the horticultural world was brought to a head in 1978 when a conference was arranged by the RHS with the title 'The practical role of gardens in the conservation of rare and threatened plants.'

As a result of changing patterns of plant marketing and increased costs of production, nurseries were cutting back on the breadth of stock offered in their catalogues. National botanic gardens were also reducing their cultivated plant collections. Government and educational establishments were operating within tighter financial constraints and the price of labour was making private gardens harder and harder to maintain. These financial factors all contributed to a loss of available plant variety.

The RHS established a steering committee to build upon the ideas generated by the conference and individuals who attended began to plan local initiatives. The aims and objectives for the fledgling organisation included the formation of the National Plant Collections® as a mechanism for preserving plant material.

By 1980 the first criteria for National Plant Collections were approved; meanwhile regional groups had been forming. By 1981 the first paid staff member, a horticultural taxonomist, had been appointed. The elements of a structure were then in place: Council and committees, full-time horticultural expertise, county groups and National Collection Holders. We were registered as a charity the following year.

Back in 1978 the 'RHS Plant Finder', the book published every year containing the names of all registered cultivars, did not exist. Therefore, one of the first tasks for the regional groups was to conduct a nursery survey, to establish which plants were 'commonly available' and which were 'rare and endangered'. This was completed in 1982. During the same year the first Plant Heritage Journal was published.

There was a steady growth in both collections and membership; by 1984 there were 200 collections and 3,000 members. By 1987 we were becoming more commercially aware, producing items for sale, which raised some funds and provided promotion of Plant Heritage at shows and plant sales. From 1990 we started producing an annual directory of the Plant Collections R, a copy of which is sent to all members each year.

In 1991 'The Pink Sheet' of rare and endangered garden plants (compiled over many years by the Plant Committee and the Secretariat) was formalised and published by the Cambridge Group. In 2010 the Threatened Plant Project (now Programme) replaced the Pink Sheet system, the aim being to set priorities for the conservation of cultivated plants.

In 1994 the Plant Conservation Committee was formed (merging previous committees), accrediting National Plant Collections, and overseeing conservation strategy

In 1992 HRH The Prince of Wales became our Patron.

By 2006 the number of National Plant Collections® had reached 650 and in 2008 we started running the Chelsea Flower Show cloakroom on behalf of the RHS, a move that has raised considerable funds. Over the years we have exhibited at shows across the country nationally and through our local groups.

In 2010 Alan Titchmarsh became our President, and our Threatened Plants Project (now programme) was launched.

In 2012 the criteria for the National Plant Collections were reviewed and revised to allow for more focussed and manageable collections.

The Plant Guardian Scheme was launched in 2013 to enable members to take part in plant conservation by nurturing just one or more rare plants in their own home or garden. Other recent innovations include the Missing Genera campaign, targeting important taxa not already represented in the collections and dispersed national collections, enabling collections to be looked after across a number of different gardens or sites.

Our 40th anniversary in 2018 was celebrated with a display at RHS Chelsea Flower Show.

In 2019 a new website was launched with an interactive map search for the collections.

The statistics for 2019 show how we have grown since our humble beginnings in the 1970s: 100,000 plant taxa are held in 650 National Collections by 400 Collection holders. 1,200 plants are nurtured by Plant Guardians and there are now 31 local groups across the nation.

We have a small team of dedicated staff running the administrative office, raising funds, researching rare plants and supporting collection holders and plant guardians, running shows, plus supporting our groups and members.

To be continued, updated to 2019