



ILLUSTRATION: NICOLE HEIDARPOUR

# ARDEN TALK

Ursula Buchan pays tribute to a charismatic 20th-century plant hunter; Bleddyn Wynn-Jones argues the case for present-day plant collecting; and Anisa Gress lauds those who find uses for show gardens after the event



NEIL HEPWORTH

## Ursula Buchan

### AN ALPINE LEGEND FROM YORKSHIRE

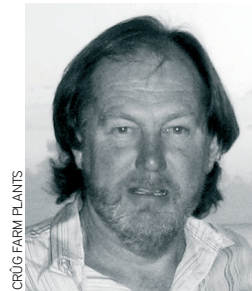
**THE PHOTOGRAPH OF A YOUNG** Reginald Farrer (see Parting Shot, p632) reminds me what a talented and intrepid plant explorer he was, and what an enormous debt we gardeners owe him. But his life might have taken a very different course, if it had not been for his family circumstances together with his oddball, complicated personality.

He was born in 1880 and educated at home, Ingleborough Hall in Clapham, North Yorkshire. His relationship with his parents (his father was a landowner and Liberal MP) deteriorated markedly after he went away to Oxford and came under the influence of bright, rich and patrician young men such as Raymond Asquith and Aubrey Herbert. Although a keen botanist from childhood, what Farrer wanted to do, when young, was write novels and plays. Unfortunately, though a marvellously witty and accomplished writer – as anyone who has enjoyed *The English Rock Garden* or *Among the Hills* will know – he was not a storyteller. He turned to writing gardening books and collecting plants, partly because of his failure in that direction and partly because he needed to earn his own living after his churchy parents

took fright when he became a Buddhist.

Farrer could be mischievous and difficult (Herbert's wife called him 'a malevolent gnome') but he was scholarly, energetic and enthusiastic in the field, and could be courageous and long-suffering; it is hard not to shed a tear when reading his servant's account to fellow plant collector Euan Cox of his lonely death on a Burmese hillside in 1920. His seeds were abandoned, but his diaries were carefully sent back to England, where his mother cut them up with scissors. Despite that, Farrer's name lives on in wonderful plants such as *Geranium farreri* and *Gentiana farreri*; in the Farrer Medal awarded by the Alpine Garden Society; and in eight remarkable, and still readable, books.

**AH, SEPTEMBER**, the climax of the year for those of us who are keen fruit gardeners. This is when we really can say we harvest the fruits of our labours. Except that, every so often, it doesn't work out like that. I am punctilious about thinning fruit, so that my trees do not overbear and become 'biennial bearing', but there is one thing about which I can do little: an air frost when the fruit is in blossom. This year, it has been the turn of the plums, greengages and damsons, as well as apricots and some pear cultivars, to be badly affected. Oh, well, gardening encourages us to aspire to many virtues, but surely one of the most useful is an uncomplaining stoicism. ■



CRÛG FARM PLANTS

## Bleddyn Wynn-Jones

### PLANT HUNTING IS STILL VALID

**WE ARE OFTEN ASKED** why we go to such lengths to collect in the wild. It is simple really. We are just curious: curious as to what wonders of diversity nature has created. We are also anxious: anxious to see it before man inevitably destroys it.

It is a sad fact that the population pressures on the wild habitats of so many countries is enormous. In recent years, for example, we have been fortunate to be allowed to collect in a remote corner of northern Vietnam which, according to the Vietnamese, had never been botanised before. There we were amid colourfully-clad hill tribes who have used the forests of the area to feed their families for generations. In modern times the lowland populations

have expanded, encroaching on more and more of what used to be their territory. The Vietnamese government for its part has given them some protection and, indeed, is actively improving their living standards by bringing them electricity and cutting rudimentary tracks for transport. Inevitably the population is expanding, with life expectancy raised as well as expectations. Through satellite television the West filters to the remotest corners, thus creating additional pressures on the only resources they have: their labour and their forests.

The new *Lilium* species we discovered there, *L. eupetes*, is just one example of what is disappearing. On ascending the forest-clad peaks of the same area we were greeted by large-scale felling of a giant *Rhododendron* 15–20m tall with large leathery leaves to 60cm long. It was a new species, of course, as was the *Clematis*

we had seen scrambling in the lower forest. The clematis seed was green, only capable of germinating a few seedlings. Undeterred, I returned the following year a month later to coincide with ripe seed, diligently following the directions of my GPS. It will come as no surprise that even the copse of shrubs it had been climbing had gone.

It is not only undescribed species that we value, but variations of plants that are already in cultivation. These are often unrecognisable to those only familiar with the clones in cultivation. The *Trochodendron aralioides* that we collected in Taiwan is a fine example, bearing larger glossy leaves on a faster-growing plant, a marvellous trait to help bring down the production cost of these architectural evergreen shrubs. ■

Bleddyn Wynn-Jones and his wife Sue own Crûg Farm Plants, Gwynedd



NEIL HEPWORTH

## Anisa Gress

### JUDGED ON YOUR LEGACY

**IN SWEDEN RECENTLY** I was taken around four of Gothenburg's gardens. They are part of a summer exhibition called Gardens of Gothenburg (ends 28 September) and, like most events of this type, the temporary display gardens are the main draw.

It is not these, however, that have left a lasting impression; rather the work invested in sprucing-up permanent plantings and the new features made for today's plant lovers and park visitors. Examples include rose borders of modern cultivars with perennials for long seasonal interest;

a woodland garden where there once was wasteland; and a fantastic kitchen garden providing produce for the restaurant of an historic house.

In this age of reuse, recycle and carbon footprints, I wonder if horticultural spectacles for pure delight are now seen to be too frivolous. The Swedish event struck a good balance with some great short-term displays that got people talking alongside those that will be a long-term benefit to local people and the environment. It will be the quality of these features maturing beyond the end of September that will be testament to the event's true success.

I can see the same thing happening with the RHS flower shows. Much of the talk and media excitement has

come from those gardens that live on beyond the few days of the show. After Chelsea, 27 exhibits were rebuilt elsewhere; after Hampton Court, at least 16 were used again. This has to be a trend for the future, benefiting, it seems, everyone.

The success of the non-sporting side of London's 2012 Olympic Games will also hang on what is left after the closing ceremony. The plan to make the site the largest urban park in Europe created in the last 150 years sounds optimistic but if it works then the games will be forever remembered warmly – if the powers that be do not deliver, then the aftertaste will be bitter indeed. ■

Anisa Gress is *The Garden News* Editor