



### ***On Kew, Group Visit to the Melon Yards***

On 9th March, our party of fifteen were met in the Davies Alpine House by Tom Freeth and Kit Strange. Tom gave a good account of the philosophy behind the design of the alpine house. In the words of the Kew web site,

'The Davies Alpine House was designed to recreate the dry, cool, windy conditions al-pines need to thrive, without using energy-intensive air conditioning and wind pumps. Conceived as two back-to-back arches, the structure creates a stack effect that draws warm air out of the building. Below ground, air is cooled in a concrete labyrinth and recir-



culated around the perimeter, while the low-iron glass exterior allows 90% of light to pass through.' Tom pointed out that using the chimney effect of the building combined with the labyrinth gives the building tremendous resilience, ensures that no simple failure such as an electricity drop - out, can cause a catastrophic failure killing all the plants in the building. Not only is

The Davies Alpine House, magnificent in the spring morning sun. The large 'immovable' trough was in the yards with the Junos but now it can be enjoyed by all.



*Tropaeolum brachyceras*  
and a particularly fine  
form of *Iris willmottiana*  
on display

the physics of the building impressive but so too is the civil engineering.

Tom told some of the history of the rock garden. Apparently Hooker jnr was not in favour claiming it was aimed at 'mere pleasure seekers'. (Alpine garden lovers, mere pleasure seekers. How dare he! Oh well maybe he had a point.) In the '60s the mixture of rocks was replaced by one rock type, a local sandstone that was thought to be more moisture retentive than limestone. Unfortunately although it looks very substantial, the original rocks are resting on a mound of earth with no foundations with the result that the rockwork is subsiding in places. Where new features have been added the rocks are resting on a substructure of blockwork.

Kit showed us round the growing area, not

Tom Freeth explaining the science behind the design of the Davies Alpine House. It is unique in being able to prevent the internal temperature rising above the external temperature on a sunny day.



Although the main focus is on bulbs I was interested to see there were some very large *Dionysias* and some rows of cuttings that looked very happy to be where they were.



normally open to the public, first visiting the glass-houses. She reminded us that the area is referred to as the Melon Yard because that was its use when it was part of the Palace walled garden.



Here Kit is explaining how the team grow various Irises. The Oncos and Regelias seem to do best in plastic pots which stand on top of the sand whereas the Junos, in clay pots, are plunged.

At first glance the gangways between the wide benches looked too narrow for comfort. In fact the table tops are on racks and can be moved to make a particular gangway wider, for example when access with a barrow is required.

In one corner there were some seed pots with seedlings. They were testing the viability of seed on behalf



Many herbaceous subjects were grown from seed sown in pumice which is the ultimate 'free draining moisture retentive' substrate. Watering is done by plunging the seed tray in about an inch of water. Here the well proven sticky yellow card is used to catch aphids and the like. Elsewhere small parasitic wasps, that lay their eggs in the aphids, were being used.

of the Seed Bank at Wakehurst.

We noticed that all the pots and labels had the same orientation except occasionally a pot would be turned through 90 degrees. This was so that Kit could easily find pots that she had decided needed attention, such as moving to another environment or potting up.

*Iris aitchisonii* a strongly coloured and large flowered species.



The sight of the Junos under the all-weather canopy was striking indeed. The range of species and hybrids was impressive especially since many we had never heard of and learned were very difficult to keep happy.





This pot is actually a strip of dimpled plastic that has a hole at the point of each dimple. The plant roots become air pruned and branch out inside the pot. At planting up time the strip is easily removed revealing a very rooty plant

Members of the Surrey Groups are fortunate to have RBG Kew on their doorstep. We are even more blessed that the staff from the alpine section make us so welcome when we visit. As an amateur, relatively new to growing flowers, I find it enormously informative to go behind the scenes with the professionals to see how they go about their business of cultivation.

We thanked Kit for a very stimulating visit. So much to remember.



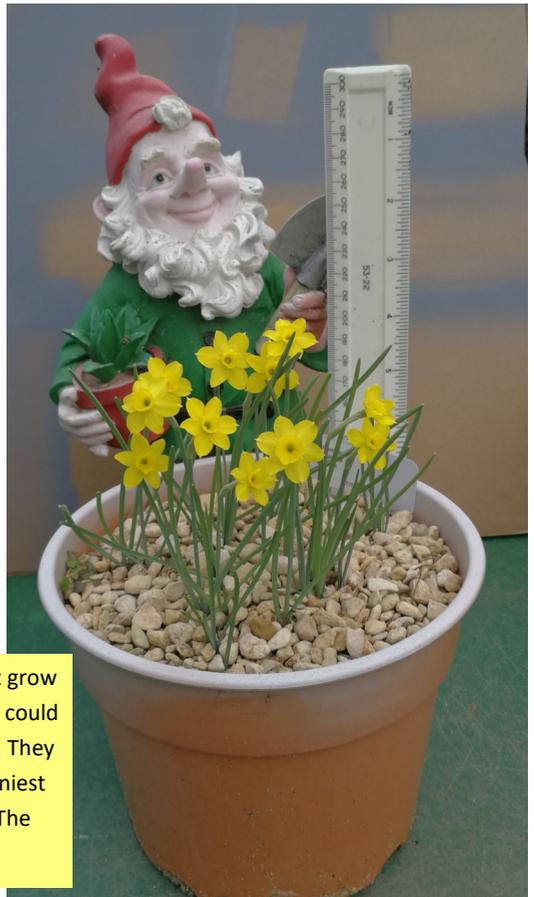
***Sublime or ridiculous?!***

After our visit to the alpine area at Kew some of us went to the Tropical Orchid Exhibition next door in the Princess of Wales House. Apparently there exists a very rare bright blue orchid that was not available for the exhibition. So that we would not be disappointed and would get an impression of what the real thing might have looked like a painted one was provided. Is it just me or.....

### ***Gnorman is social distancing***

Some of you have been asking after Gnorman, especially in 'these difficult times'. I would like to put your minds at rest and assure you that he is no worse than usual. He claims to be well over 70 but doesn't need anybody to do his shopping. He thinks the Chancellor is going to pay him for self-isolating. I've told him 80% of nothing is nothing. Told me he had an elevated temperature this morning so I put him under the bench out of the sun. I've told him he won't catch any viruses but he says if other important people like the Prince of Wales and the Prime Minister can then he doesn't feel safe. He is quite good at not touching his face but has stopped washing his hands because he says the paint is coming off.

No need to look so smug Gnorman, you didn't grow them. I only asked you to hold the ruler so we could see how diminutive these Narcissus Chiva are. They have been grown outside all winter in the sunniest part of the garden for maximum light. Cute? The daffodils—not Gnorman!



### ***Pleasant surprises***

When Alan Edwards decided he had done enough potting up he passed a number of seed pots to me. I've grown them on for a couple of years and some are showing their first flowers. This *Bellevalia forniculata* from Gotbot seed surprised me with the unusual turquoise blue of the flower. Needless to say reproduction is not doing it justice. You need to be there! I looked it up on the internet only to find that this is what it does and you can pay £12.50 for a bulb when they are in stock. Thank you Alan.

## ***Cat Litter by any other name would smell as sweet***

Following the Mar.'20 edition I received the following email from Paul Cumbleton

Hi Mike,

Hope you are well. Thanks for sending the latest newsletter. Regarding Robert's article on cat litter, I thought you might like to know (and could perhaps share in the next newsletter) that exactly the same finer grade of molar clay that used to be in the Tesco cat litter is still available, not as cat litter but as absorbent granules used to soak up industrial spillages.

Like cat litter, this kind of product can be made of various materials so you need to get the right type. Two that are the correct type are:

"All Purpose Absorbent Granules" which is sold by Euro Car Parts, who have branches all over the country and also sell online - see <https://www.eurocarparts.com/p/euro-car-parts-absorbing-granules-20ltr-542770770>. This is the cheapest source we have found – if you actually go and buy it at a branch, they may charge less than the web price – we paid just £6.50 a bag which made it cheaper than the Tesco stuff used to be.

Another product that is the correct type is "New Safety Tread Industrial Spillage Absorbent". This is available from several sources; the cheapest we have found is <https://www.racking2go.co.uk/safety-tread-granules.html>.

Happy growing!

Best wishes

Paul



FOR YOU!



The woodland area on the way back to the Victoria Gate at Kew. The blue bells are *Scilla sibirica*

***Kew Botanic Garden  
Remembered***

My wife, Ann, had a special regard for Kew. Her father, an Under-Secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture was personally responsible for looking after the funding of Kew. He was a keen naturalist, familiar with the history of Kew and very supportive of their aims. All this he passed on to his daughter when he took her on regular visits in the 60s. I remember, when I was a student, travelling from Tyneside to visit Ann where she lived in Putney and taking the train together to Kew Bridge. We called at St Anne's church on Kew Green and I was told that Gainsborough is buried there along with several others that I had heard of. Then we entered by the impressive Main Gates, now the Elizabeth Gate, and walked down the main avenue past the Orangery towards the magnificent glasshouses. They certainly knew how to do imposing in Victorian times and it worked on me.

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