



# HOW WE CONSERVE PLANTS

**Our conservation strategy**

Patron: HRH the Prince of Wales

# How we conserve plants

**Once it's gone it's gone! Plants growing in gardens might seem safer than those in the wild, but they can easily be lost forever if nobody is looking after them. Plant Heritage is the only organisation with the aim of conserving garden plants across the British Isles and Ireland.**

Our cultivated flora is incredibly rich, resulting from development and care over centuries by dedicated gardeners. The heritage contained in these living organisms can only be preserved by active gardeners in living collections.

These plants are a valuable historical and future resource, whether for their beauty, or having edible, medicinal or other useful properties. Each has a unique genetic code making it impossible to replace if lost.

Conservation of a diverse range of plants underpins our resilience to a changing world, while meeting challenges such as climate change, pests and diseases and biodiversity loss.

Our conservation work is carried out in line with a five-year strategy that helps us to keep to the highest conservation standards and is delivered through working with National Plant Collection® holders, our volunteers and supporters.

## Our conservation strategy aims to:

- **increase the number of cultivated plants conserved**
- **develop and maintain good standards of curation**
- **inform and engage others with our conservation work**
- **influence global thinking on issues around plant conservation**





Willows have been used for centuries, whether for making baskets, hedges, coracles, living sculptures, flower arranging, coppiced for firewood or as ornamental plants. West Wales Willows in Carmarthenshire conserve over 260 different cultivars of willow all carefully selected for different purposes. These are made available as cuttings, allowing this diversity to be shared with those keen to make use of it.

**Left:** Alan and Justine Burgess and their National Plant Collection of *Salix* in Carmarthenshire

©West Wales Willows



# Aim one · Increase the number of cultivated plants conserved

## Creating Collections

We help plant lovers to create and manage groups of cultivated plants in **National Plant Collections**<sup>®</sup> (NPCs).

We want to inspire more people to take part and increase the numbers of plants conserved within collections. We have broadened the categories of collection to allow more people to get involved.

There is no limit to the number of Collections that can be held for any one plant group and we encourage the duplication of collections. Growing plants in different places under different conditions improves their chances of survival.

## Creating community

We aim to see more NPCs held by groups of people across many locations. We want it to be easier for people to get involved with collections and to provide back-ups for each other. We would like all types of communities, including educational organisations, to hold National Plant Collections.

The plants in NPCs are a living library and with careful propagation and care can live on indefinitely. No collection holder can stay active forever though, so we work with them to create a plan to pass on their plants and knowledge.

**Right:** Lucy Skellorn tending her National Plant Collection of *Iris* (Sir Michael Foster introductions) in Suffolk

## Sharing knowledge

To prevent the loss of rare cultivars we track their locations and assess which are threatened, through our **Threatened Plants Programme**.

We aim to make this information more widely accessible and work to get threatened cultivars included in one of our conservation schemes. By linking with similar organisations and specialist societies, we can research and access plants that may otherwise be at risk of disappearing.

## Sharing plants

We promote the **Plant Guardian**<sup>®</sup> scheme, through which any member of Plant Heritage can look after individual rare plants (without looking after a whole NPC) and the **Plant Exchange**, an annual event during which rare plants are swapped between members. Our local groups will continue to play an active part in these schemes.





There are 20 National Plant Collections of *Iris*. Between them, they represent nearly half of irises known to still be in UK cultivation. Some collections cover a taxonomic group, but others are brought together by a shared history, such as the collection of irises bred by Sir Michael Foster.

Foster has been called the 'father of iris breeding', creating a new, more robust type of garden plant.



The collection has been researched and put together by Lucy Skellorn – who is Sir Michael's great-great-granddaughter. When clearing the family home, Lucy discovered some intriguing papers relating to his work with irises. Through family documents, library archives, old notebooks and nursery catalogues Lucy has tracked down living examples of the irises that were introduced by Sir Michael. The Collection celebrates a family legacy and keeps alive the unique characteristics of the plants that he bred.



## Aim two · Develop and maintain good standards of curation

We require collection holders to demonstrate best practice curation standards for their collections. This includes identifying, labelling, recording and cultivating their plants, and sharing this knowledge with visitors to the collection. Through this, they have the support of our **conservation team** and volunteer **collection coordinators**.

We bring together knowledge about the plants in our conservation schemes by recording them to an agreed standard.

To facilitate this, Plant Heritage has its own sophisticated, user-friendly plant recording system called Persephone.

We help collection holders use this system to record their collections and research, which can include images, cultural and historical information.

By having plant records held consistently and centrally, we can better inform and monitor our conservation work.

## Aim three · Inform and engage others with our conservation work

With threats to ecosystems and the plant kingdom, such as those posed by climate change, it has become more important than ever for us to conserve a diversity of plants. As a leading plant conservation charity in Britain and Ireland, we work to inform and engage with existing members and new audiences to promote the cultural, medicinal, culinary and aesthetic benefits of cultivated plants and their conservation.

We share knowledge and resources with members and the wider community, through events that everyone can attend, plant shows, social media and our engaging website.



©Lackham College

**Above:** Students at Lackham College, Wiltshire, mapping their proposed rose collection

## Aim four · Influence global thinking on issues around plant conservation

Many of the threats to cultivated plants are not unique to the UK. Climate change, the advance of pests and diseases, loss of growing space, increased barriers to cross border exchanges, are all felt globally, so it is essential that we continue to engage with the international conservation community.

We follow best practice in international conservation vision, policy and legislation, as well as current best practice on sustainability.

International agreements support the conservation of diverse cultivated plants as a tool to promote sustainable biodiversity.

We engage with relevant organisations to contribute to this thinking, and to maintain our botanical knowledge and understanding.

**Below:** Avenue of *Washingtonia robusta*, part of the National Plant Collection of *Arecaeae* (hardy & half-hardy) at Ventnor Botanic Gardens in the Isle of Wight.

©Ventnor Botanic Gardens



When the first *Trachycarpus* palm trees were brought to the UK in the 1860s, it was only balmy Ventnor Botanic Gardens on the southern tip of the Isle of Wight that was able to successfully grow them. At that time, only two types could survive outside, but results from trials at Ventnor which began in 2000 have shown a twenty-fold increase in species that can be grown outside.

This is in line with decades of observations of the climate warming. This Collection is working to increase current understanding about how environmental change affects plants, trees and gardens and how they might be impacted in the future.








**Above:** Gaby Reynolds is a Plant Guardian and helps with our annual Plant Exchange. Gaby holds a National Plant Collection of *Nicotiana* in Dumfries and Galloway

**Front cover:** Roger Parsons with his National Plant Collection of *Lathyrus* in Sussex ©Clive Nichols

**If you've been inspired by what we do, here's how you can get involved:**

- start a National Plant Collection – as an individual, community, workplace or other group
- join us today and take part in our national and local group activities, such as our annual Plant Exchange, plant sales, talks and visits
- record your rare plant as a Plant Guardian
- donate to support our vital conservation work

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