

FOR MORE THAN a century the RHS Seed Distribution Scheme has benefited the Society and its members – the Seed Department, which has run the scheme from RHS Garden Wisley, Surrey since 1905, started life at the Society's former garden at Chiswick in the 19th century. Today, it receives every year between 5,000 and 6,000 orders from members (who pay a £12 administration charge), each able to choose up to 20 packets from the annual seed list.

As well as supplying seeds within the Society, the department also contributes to the Index Seminum, a seed-exchange programme between botanical institutions around the world. It also supports the Campaign for School Gardening and Britain in Bloom.

More than 250,000 packets of seeds are distributed each year, undertaken by four staff, led by Horticultural Team Leader Liz Blackler. Looking back at past catalogues is interesting: of the 316 seed types in the 1911 list, 48 are still collected today (there are more than 400 species and cultivars this year). 'Herbaceous perennials are certainly the most popular,' says Liz. 'We generally get fewer requests for seed of trees, shrubs and bulbs – I suppose because people feel they take longer to grow. Yet, this year cyclamen seed has been popular.'

From four gardens

As seed is collected at all four RHS gardens, there is great diversity. Showy blue-flowered, thistle-like *Berkheya purpurea* at RHS Garden Hyde Hall, Essex thrives in the arid, warm conditions of the Dry Garden. The moist soil, early growing season and mild winters at RHS Garden Rosemoor, Devon, are perfect conditions for many plants – seeds seem to form better there than at the other gardens.

RHS Garden Harlow Carr in North Yorkshire is well known for its drifts of *Primula* Harlow

Carr Hybrids, and the shady, cool, moist atmosphere allows beautiful *Meconopsis* (Himalayan poppies) to grow better than in the South East. Wisley, however, grows the widest range, including tender plants from The Glasshouse, such as pink banana *Musa velutina*.

Year-round work

Timing is key in seed collection. Gathering when seeds have ripened but just before they naturally distribute themselves is vital. *Anemone blanda* and *A. nemorosa*, among the first each year to be harvested, are also among the hardest to judge, as their seed remains green.

The year begins with bulbous spring plants; in midsummer, seed harvesting goes up a gear with *Iris*, *Primula* and *Kniphofia*. Late summer and autumn is the time for berries such as *Sarcococca*, *Ilex*, *Gaultheria* and *Myrtus*. The season ends in November with the compiling of the new catalogue, then attention shifts to cleaning seed and despatching orders to members from January to April.

Some of the department's work requires caution. Seed pods such as those of *Euphorbia characias* explode if picked too late, while gloves are worn when handling toxic plants such as *Aconitum* and *Helleborus*. The bloom or dust of some *Primula* can irritate lungs, so dust masks or extractor fans are used.

The team are careful not to damage displays of ornamental seedheads when harvesting. Where plants in the gardens are deadheaded, some will be grown elsewhere for seed – sweet peas in Wisley village, for example, or climbers such as *Ipomoea lobata* on the Trials Field.

Preparing and storing

Much of the work is done by hand, just as when the scheme began. After collection, seeds are put into cardboard boxes (which

The RHS has distributed seed to its members for more than 100 years. Collected in all four of its gardens, seed is cleaned, sorted, stored and distributed by a small team of staff and volunteers at RHS Garden Wisley (right)

date from 1905) and placed in a drying room with two dehumidifiers.

Cleaning and sorting seed is a laborious task, mainly using tweezers. Berries are washed to remove the flesh while tough-skinned berries such as *Cotoneaster horizontalis* are briefly passed through a liquidiser with a blunt blade. Cosmetic exfoliating gloves work well on the hard seed casings of *Alchemilla mollis* or on papery casings such as *Hosta* and *Agapanthus*.

Seeds are weighed, packaged and kept in the storage room at 10°C (37.5°F); seed of plants such as *Sarcococca*, roses, *Skimmia japonica* and *Mahonia x media* can germinate at this temperature, so are stored in refrigerators.

The list of plants available varies. 'Changeable weather may affect availability of some seed,' Liz says. 'Cold winters may reduce the number of pollinators, lowering seed set and viability, while hot, dry summers can dry out some seed prematurely or even prevent it forming.' This year's cold winter coupled with a hot dry spell in summer has caused problems with some plants. Even so, many RHS members will still be able to select seed and grow plants they have admired on visits to the Society's gardens. ■

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i For a 2010 seed list, write to RHS Membership Department (seeds), 80 Vincent Square, London SW1P 2PE; tel: 0845 062 1111 (weekdays, 9am–5pm); or view online at www.rhs.org.uk/seedlist from 1 November. ● Read more about the RHS Seed Distribution Scheme in the December issue of *The Plantsman*

Special collection

The Society has been distributing seed from its gardens for more than 100 years. **Simon Akeroyd** describes the work of the Seed Distribution Scheme, which allows members to grow a little bit of an RHS garden in their own plots. Photography by Jill Richardson



TIM SANDALL



HIGH STANDARDS

Seed sent to non-EU countries has to meet strict standards set out by the Food and Environmental Research Agency. It is time consuming to get seed to this standard (from collecting, cleaning, drying, labelling and storing, pictures this page), but all RHS seed does – including that sent to members in Europe. The entire seed batch for distribution has to be sent for testing, and no more than 0.1 percent of chaff can be present, and 0.01 percent of soil.

The annual seed catalogue (above left) often includes plants that are unusual, new or not found in commercial catalogues.

As seeds are collected from plants grown in the open, due to cross-pollination few named selections are likely to come 'true'. Plants most susceptible to change include aquilegias, primulas, and hellebores. However, this means you could end up growing something special – perhaps even something completely new.

