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Piedmont Chapter
North American Rock Garden Society
Chapel Hill, Durham, Raleigh, NC

John Elsley— International Man of Plants

Listening to John Elsley, one hears the tones of a gentleman and a scholar whose life in horticulture has led him down many paths. It is this breadth and diversity of experience that makes our speaker for the March meeting well equipped to talk about “Exciting New and Underutilized Plants for Local Landscapes.” A consummate plantsman with experience in both England and the U.S., John has been a curator, a taxonomist, a director of commercial horticulture, and a collector and developer of new plants. Apparently blessed with inordinate energy, he has also found time to excel in sports and photography and as a collector of books, paintings, and English ceramics.

The Early Years

Apparently the twig was bent early for John. Both of his parents were avid gardeners; and some of his earliest memories, at about age 4 or 5, were of going to work with his father in their wartime victory garden allotment on Sunday mornings. At age 11 John went to a Quaker boarding school near Cambridge; and, in that chalky landscape, he further developed his interests in the environment and botany. His progress in these pursuits was enhanced

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Cornus angustata ‘Elsbry’ PPAF (Empress of China™)

Starting in the 1990s, several evergreen species of dogwood have begun to become available to gardeners. Although varying in flower size, floriferousness, evergreenness, etc., some have shown encouraging potential for southeastern gardens. For a brief but useful overview of evergreen species, you may wish to check Todd Lasseigne’s report in the NC Association of Nurserymen, *Nursery Notes* (<http://www.ncan.com/nursery%20notes%20articles%202003/evergreen%20dogwoods.pdf>).

Among those of most interest is the Chinese *C. angustata*, which is closely related to the much more widely grown deciduous Chinese species, *C. kousa*. Not surprisingly, John Elsley was way ahead of the curve on this one and had already singled out a promising seedling in his Greenwood, SC garden 15 years ago. After carefully watching it for years he named it Empress of China™ and introduced it into commerce in 2006. The following desirable characteristics prompted this choice.

(Continued on page 4)

April 21, 2007

Allen Bush

Jelitto Seeds (former owner of Holbrook
Farm & Nursery)
Louisville KY

“What the Seed(y) Guy Grows in His Garden”

ATTENTION: CHANGE OF DATE & PLACE!

ANNUAL PICNIC— May 19, 2007,
Noon

JC Raulston Arboretum, Raleigh
Potluck Picnic in York Auditorium
of McSwain Education Center
Guided tour of newly installed rock/scree
garden

Hosted by Anne Porter
Information: Bobby Ward

Bring plants (free) to swap with fellow
chapter members
— no plant sale or auction at this event



Cornus angustata ‘Empress of China’ fruit



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by a fine botany teacher in his senior year – the euphoniously named Mr. Plant.

Hearing the siren call of horticulture, John left school at age 18 to work as a gardener at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew for a year. His enviable position title – a fine carry-over from the Victorian era – was “Garden Improver”.

After leaving for a two-year program in commercial horticulture at a local college he returned to the staff at Kew, where he worked with the Director George Taylor. At 25 he left Kew for the University of Leister where he took his degree in Taxonomic Botany and studied with, among others, Professor Tutin, the author of the *Flora of British Isles*. Amidst the demands of his studies, he was also captain of the track team and a keen quarter-miler who competed at the national level.

Having an interest in the flora of the arctic, John then spent the summer in northern Scandinavia and Greenland. These travels were followed by an expedition, in the late 1960s, to the Atlas Mountains in Morocco – an area that had not been visited by botanists since the 1930s – where he made multiple collections.

He then settled in as a botanist at the Royal Horticultural Gardens at Wisley, putting his taxonomic education to work in identifying plants, participating in the Chelsea show, and visiting a multitude of gardens.

A Call from America

Then – “out of the blue,” John says -- Peter Ravan called him in 1973 and invited him to work at the Missouri Botanical Gardens, where he spent nine years as Curator of Herbaceous Plants. John had retained his interest in commercial horticulture, however, which prompted him to accept an offer to join Park Seed, which had recently bought Wayside Gardens. He became Director of Horticulture at Wayside, where he was responsible for numerous introductions, as well as for bringing other lesser known plants to a wider audience. Among the favorites of these are the Stella d’Oro daylilies, Austin roses and the French Meidiland roses, the Royal Heritage hellebores, and a variety of hostas, peonies, and daylilies.

Some of the above selections were developed in partnership with nurseryman Roy Klehm, for whom he went to work when he left Wayside about seven years ago. Klehm’s Song Sparrow Farm and Nursery and its exclusively wholesale counterpart, Beaver Creek Nursery, grow their own products, with a focus on zones 4 & 5. John and Roy have continued their search for high quality plants as well as further developing the mail order catalogue and fine

websites: www.songsparrow.com and

www.beavercreeknursery.com. *Cornus angustata* ‘Empress of China’, featured in a plant profile in this issue of the Trillium, is one of John’s worthy introductions at Klehm’s.

Beyond Horticulture

A keen photographer and golfer, John also maintains his other interests. It seems that serious plant collectors are often serious collectors of other things as well, and John fits that pattern. His collections include horticulturally related items such as early 20th century watercolors of gardens and old garden books. John also collects English ceramics, and has a special interest in English Lusterware. In fact, part of John’s collection of Lusterware was recently displayed at the Mint Museum of Art in Charlotte.

John’s Garden

John’s personal garden in Greenwood, SC is primarily a woodland garden in three vertical layers. He removed the conifers to provide an upper canopy of large deciduous trees. The middle layer includes Japanese maples (a special favorite of his) and magnolias. The bottom layer is primarily low shrubs and herbaceous plants. John especially treasures and enjoys the garden from mid-winter through early spring, an affection that he traces back to the British garden tradition of seeking plants that make a good winter display. He has also learned to appreciate the value of foliage because, in contrast to his island homeland, flowers come and go quickly in the spring and summer heat of the southeastern US.

A few of the plants that John particularly values in his garden and which he will probably mention in his lecture are the following:



Photo courtesy of Camellia Forest Nursery

Camellia ‘Crimson Candles’

Unusual camellias: *C. 'Crimson Candles'*, a recent Cliff Park introduction, is currently making a very favorable impression. Bobby Ward, in his splendid *The Plant Hunter's Garden*, indicates that it "produces bright rose-red single flowers in February and March, and has bronze-red new foliage. The sepals surrounding the bud are also red and, as the flower matures inside the bud, the elongated flower buds look like red candles." This is a vigorous and disease resistant variety with good floral cold hardiness.

Unusual miniature daffodils: *Narcissus minor* 'Cedric Morris' is a particular favorite. It is a late flowering trumpet type narcissus from northern Spain that blooms from late winter to early spring.

Iris unguicularis: This beardless iris that blooms from late fall through late winter fits well with the goal of developing strong win-



Photo by Ken Walker

Iris unguicularis

ter interest. Tony Avent reports that it has 18" narrow green leaves and 2" fragrant light lavender-purple flowers. It needs a well drained location.



Photo by Davesgarden.com

Narcissus minor 'Cedric Morris'



Photo by Tony Avent with permission

Acanthus 'Summer Beauty'

Acanthus 'Summer Beauty': John considers this plant, which he obtained from Tony Avent, to be especially striking and one of the 10 very best for this part of the country. It is a hybrid that grows much better than most other cultivars in our hot summers.

Other favorites include multiple cultivars *Daphne odora* and of herbaceous peonies. He is also enthusiastic about Japanese maples. John grows several but has recently been especially impressed with *Acer palmatum* 'Hefner's Red' which has almost black foliage. It's an NC selection that is well-suited for the Southeast.

Callicarpa dichotoma 'Duet': John is a fan of variegated foliage and this is one of his newest favorites. A 2006 connoisseur's plant at the Raulston Arboretum, this cultivar was released in November 2006 by the National Arboretum, in cooperation with Tennessee Technological University. The leaves are medium green with distinct yellow margins. Clusters of small, white fruit are borne in late summer. The Raulston Arboretum notes that this is the first stable variegated plant found in the genus. They also observe that, in four years, it produces a plant slightly more than 3' tall and wide. We look forward to hearing from John about these plants and



Callicarpa dichotoma 'Duet'

others. We anticipate his sharing with us his wide experience in the many contemporary facets of horticulture.

✍ Kirtley Cox

(Continued from page 1)

Form: A dense, upright to rounded, small tree generally similar to *C. kousa*. Size is estimated to be 10-12 feet tall x 8-10' feet wide in 10 years. Mr. Elsley's parent tree is 20 feet tall with a 15- foot spread.

Foliage: Evergreen, leathery, elliptical to oval (~3" long x 1" wide) and dark green. Unlike some varieties, in which the foliage turns purple and tends to roll inward during cold weather, color is maintained year-round. Although some traces of purple may occur with the coldest temperatures, winter foliage appearance and retention is quite good. The old foliage sloughs off in mid-spring, after the emergence of new leaves.

Flower: Flowers are about 1½ inches across, with showy, practically overlapping, pointed bracts (as with *C. kousa*). They are initially greenish, turning creamy-white as they mature. Blooming commences in mid- to late May in up-state South Carolina, approximately two to three weeks after *C. kousa*. The floral display is quite heavy and lasts from six to eight weeks, longer than most other dogwoods. Furthermore, this cultivar flowers at an early age. Tony Avent has a specimen and confirms that this cultivar is especially floriferous even when small. The blossoms are followed by rounded, fleshy, orange-red, raspberry-like pendulous fruits that are quite attractive to both people and birds.



C. angustata 'Empress of China' flowering in John Elsley's garden

Culture: Soil preferences are similar to most other dogwoods, i.e., well-drained but moisture retentive, and probably slightly acidic. It has done well in high pine shade as well as sunny locations. Open field plantings in Winchester, TN (Zone 6) have withstood temperatures near 0. It has also prospered in the steamy environs of Charleston, SC.

✍ Kirtley Cox



Cornus angustata in full flower in John Elsley's Garden



Plant Portrait: *Asarum*

The gingers are grown for their beautiful leathery leaves. Often listed as a 'ground cover' in general garden books, but they are much more than that. Most are hardly vigorous enough to cover large areas quickly and because they are for the most part slow to propagate, these choice plants are seldom offered.

Most of the plants in the United States come primarily from the southeast where many forms can be found growing in woodlands and shady hillsides. If you have a chance to take a trip to the Blue Ridge mountains this is one plant you should be looking for. *Asarum virginica*, *arifolia*, and *shuttleworthii* are some of the names given to the many species which can be found.

Aristifolia has arrow shaped leaves as the names suggests while *shuttleworthii* has more rounded leaves. Polished green leaves some

splashed with silvery markings is why I find this group of plants so fascinating. However I have found that asarum attract very little attention from most garden visitors, but are usually appreciated by the observant few. *Asarum shuttleworthii* has really nice winter interest as well when its foliage becomes tinted burgundy red.

Asarum shuttleworthii var. *harperi* 'Callaway' is a dwarf form and has a vigorous habit with attractive silvery markings. I have one which has very pronounced mottling of silvery on dark green named 'Eco Dark Heart' a selection made by Don Jacobs from Georgia. Some really nice variations are being grown by collectors. *Asarum europaeum* from Europe is perhaps the most widely grown and available ginger often self sowing in the garden.

The Asian asarum however are perhaps the most desirable plants for collectors. However many of them are borderline hardy in our area and are rather expensive to purchase. I grew *A. kumageanum* a zone 7 plant from Japan for many years but lost it one winter. It was perhaps one of the most attractive asarum I have grow. *A. splendens* also very nice from China now widely



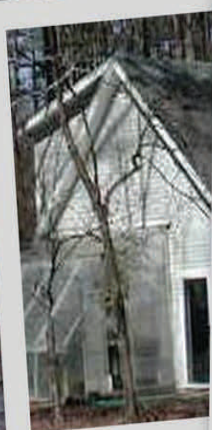
Asarum shuttleworthii var. *harperi* 'Callaway'



House For Sale

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Contact: The Home Team (919) 967-6363**

<http://i164.photobucket.com/albums/u11/dmaroni/?start=all> for tour of the gardens

Calling for Contributors to The Trillium

In the few years that Dave Duch and I have co-edited The Trillium, I have been delighted and surprised at the number of members who have been willing to write an article for the newsletter. With such a great group of plants people, there is no shortage of talent here.

Some of you may be shy though. I don't mind asking since I can be OK with someone saying no to our request.. The problem is that I don't know everyone, even now, and I don't know what your interests are.

I invite you to talk with Dave and me about what you might enjoy doing for the chapter through the newsletter. We're good to work with, reasonable about time-lines, and willing to stretch ourselves to accommodate.

I hope you have enjoyed the recent articles by members and would like to see more. We'd like your feedback to know if we're on track..

We would especially appreciate those who are willing to write brief plant profiles for us.

Thanks,
Marian and Dave

Calling For Piedmont Chapter Open Garden Days

Are you are strolling though your winter garden now, enjoying every new little bloom peaking out at you, just think how joyous it will be when Spring comes into full swing. Want to share this with others? We'd like to encourage members to open their gardens when they are in their glory. Maybe April and/or May would be your choice? You know when your garden is at its best for sharing, so we invite you to come forth with dates, when you would be willing to share your garden with other chapter members. If you garden is at its best at other times, we can run this feature again.

This will be announced again at the March meeting when John Elsley talks, but I do hope to hear from you , email is good, by the end of March. We will print a schedule of Open Gardens in the April-May issue of The Trillium, which should go out by April 7th. Remember the Picnic is May 19, so you may want to plan with that in mind. Be sure to include an email address and phone number so folks can contact you for directions.

✍ Marian and Dave

Trough Culture of Sedums

Sedums are described by Lincoln Foster as utility plants that will flourish in the most difficult of sites and the most meager of soils. The low, spreading species of Sedum have an aggressive way of spreading around in sunny sites, like my rock garden. These spreading Sedums are perfect for trough culture, as their growth will be more restrained and they won't overrun other plants that have more restrained growth habits.

They can also be placed in troughs closer to eye level on benches or walls. The lowest growing Sedums will only need an inch or two of soil, though 3 or 4 inches would yield better results. Most Sedums will do best in full to part sun, though there are exceptions.

For planting, I'd suggest mixing sand in with garden soil or potting soil to create a well-drained planting medium. Sedums need well drained soil, but not scree conditions. Tall upright Sedums like 'Autumn Joy' would not do well in a shallow container, so I'd stick to the low species.

Sedums will survive, and probably thrive, on just natural precipitation, so one doesn't need to be concerned with watering detail while away on vacation. Some attention to watering during summer droughts will maintain the foliage in attractive condition. For overwintering the troughs, spending the winter on the ground rather than exposed in an elevated location would be beneficial.

Below are some good Sedums for troughs; all but the last two keep their leaves in the winter:

- *S. acre* – (golden moss) yellow flowers, very hardy;
- *S. album* – white flowers, leaves turn red in winter, very hardy;
- *S. dasyphyllum* – powder blue leaves, pink flowers;
- *S. spurium* – flowers white, pink or red;
- *S. ternatum* – white flowers, plant in part shade, native to Eastern US;
- *S. kamtchaticum* – yellow flowers, deciduous, taller than most species;
- *S. spathulifolium* – blue green leaves, yellow flowers, deciduous, native to West Coast of US, this species is the least hardy of the list.

✍ **John Gilrein**, *plant-of-the-month coordinator*

Reprinted with permission from the November, 2006 issue of Green Dragon Tales, newsletter of Adirondack Chapter, NARGS



available because it propagates well but has been disappointing in its performance.

A. nipponicum and *A. takaoi*, are hardy to zone 5 and have done well in the garden for the last ten years or so. Both species are from Japan and have attractive silver foliage. *A. takaoi* has very small leaves and has a long history in Japan with many named forms in cultivation. Both however are very slow to spread but have persisted in my garden. A plant I originally received as *A. japonicum* now named *A. 'Gingersnap'* is a very vigorous plant with small matte green leaves and silver veining. This plant spreads nicely in the garden and has proven to be very reliable. I have Barry Yinger to thank for introducing many of us to this wonderful group of plants which are outstanding when grown well.

To me nothing is nicer than a collection along a woodland path where the varied leaf shapes and textures can be appreciated. You may even find yourself stopping to observe the rather bizarre purplish or greenish, cup or urn-shaped flowers usually hidden at ground level. When this occurs you should know that you have truly become a true asarum admirer.

✍ Don Ohl



Reprinted with permission. Long Island Chapter newsletter.

Asarum takaoi



March 17, 2007

John Elsley

**Song Sparrow Nursery and Beaver
Creek Nursery
Greenwood, S.C.**

**"Exciting New and Underutilized
Plants for Local Landscapes"**

REMINDER

We encourage you to bring goodies to share during the meetings this year. If your last name begins with the letters below, we hope you'll bring something to the appropriate monthly meeting. Thanks.

March R—U

April V—Z

May — Picnic

The Trillium, Newsletter of the Piedmont Chapter
The North American Rock Garden Society
1422 Lake Pine Drive, Cary, NC 27511

Place
Stamp
Here

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Bobby Ward, Chair

Bobby Wilder, Treasurer

Marian Stephenson, Past Chair

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Tom Harville

Todd Lasseigne

Marlyn Miller

David White

TRILLIUM EDITORS:

Dave Duch and Marian Stephenson

OTHER SIGNIFICANT POSITIONS:

Sept. Plant Sale Manager: Kirtley Cox

Refreshments: Gwen and Maurice Farrier

First Class Mail

Mail label

Spring Break!

If you're looking for a little relaxation and a bit of inspiration, why not take a couple of days off and visit one of the wonderful public gardens that lie within a day's drive of the Triangle. If you check the websites for the various gardens, you're sure to find something that will tempt you.

Here's an example. Until April 1, the **Atlanta Botanical Garden** is offering *Orchid Daze with Fräbel: Glass Impressions*, a special exhibition of detailed glass sculptures of internationally acclaimed Hans Godo Fräbel that complements the Garden's world-renowned orchid collection. <http://www.atlantabotanicalgarden.org>

Or, if you miss that, you can head north a little later and catch the Dale Chihuly's **Garden of Glass** that will be installed in the glass at the **Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens** in Pittsburgh, PA from May through December. <http://www.phippsconservatory.org/>

Some other possibilities (in no particular order) are:

The Japanese House and Garden (Shofuso), Fairmont Park, Philadelphia, PA. <http://www.shofuso.com/>

Chanticleer Gardens, Wayne, PA (near Philadelphia) <http://www.chanticleergarden.org/>

Daniel Stowe Botanical Garden, Belmont, NC <http://www.dsbg.org/index.php>

Longwood Gardens, Kennett Square, PA <http://www.longwoodgardens.org/>

Maymont, Richmond, VA <http://www.maymont.org/gardens/index.asp>

Memphis Botanic Garden, Memphis, TN <http://www.memphisbotanicgarden.com/>

The Scott Arboretum of Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, PA <http://www.scottarboretum.org/>

Norfolk Botanical Garden <http://www.norfolkbotanicalgarden.org/>

And don't forget the Open Days Program of the Garden Conservancy. You can check the schedule or buy a directory on the following website: <http://www.gardenconservancy.org/opendays/>

Compliments of Donna Maroni.