

Record Keeping - A Lust for Lists

Rob Cole

I have a great fondness for lists.

The notion of putting bits of information together in an orderly and standardised fashion has always been appealing to me, and the advent of computers meant that I could run amok with my list making. My first computer was a Sinclair ZX, a complete joke by today's standards, but I still have some of the information I collected on its tapes, and it introduced me to databases. My current software for my lists is the database part of Microsoft Works, not a particularly powerful programme, but it allows me to sort alphabetically on any of the fields, to carry out searches for records matching a set of criteria, and to find key words in an instant.

My first seed sowing records on a 'proper' PC (an 8MHz Amstrad with only a floppy disk for data storage) go back to June 1990, and each year since then I have kept close records of what we have sown, where the seed came from, the date of sowing, the number of pots or trays sown, the date of potting up, and the number of plants yielded, together with any salient comments. I now have 30 years' worth of records to draw upon, which I use in deciding the optimum time for sowing each species or genera and which now forms the basis of another database called 'Time to Sow'.

During the 1990's I was a keen grower of Auriculas, and had collected books on them to gain information on the various cultivars, but none of the books had all of the information, so in 1998 I started a database gathering together the information in all of the books and from any other sources I could find, including writing to some of the growers for first hand facts. The list has been revised and added to annually since then, and is currently in its 22nd edition. The yearly additions are now recorded by a longtime friend, Les Allen, a one time NCCPG Collection Holder of the Alpine Auriculas, and I proof read and confirm his entries every December. The latest edition describes over 5,779 cultivars and, as far as I know, is the only such list available which covers these plants so comprehensively.

Not all my lists are as ambitious, though some are as lengthy. I have a database of all of our plants in the garden and on the nursery which includes the plant name, where it was bought, when we bought it, how much we paid, and where the plant is in the garden or on the nursery. It currently has 4,340 entries. I also have a list of all the plants we have lost or removed here over the years, a staggering 3,86 entries in 21 years to date. I dread to think of the cost. And I have a list of all of the wildflowers and grasses I have identified in our meadow, and a list of all the butterflies too, a total of 23 species.

All of our horticultural books are catalogued (257 entries currently), and I have a separate database of my books on Primulas (44 entries). My list of local horticultural societies (240 entries) is absolutely invaluable when it comes to target advertising of our plant sales and horticultural events. My collection of colour slides is also catalogued thoroughly (3,593 slides), although I now rarely refer to them since my later digital pictures are so much better. I have already mentioned my list of available Echinacea species and cultivars in a previous Newsletter, and the total has now reached 434.

All gardeners have their Wants List, and mine has 459 entries - where I shall put them if I ever get them all is anybody's guess. Over the last few years I have started re-collecting miniature and species Narcissus having lost my entire collection in the 2010/11 winter, and I now have a separate list of 230 of those to look out for, too.

I have just realised that the only list I haven't got is a list of my lists - better get started.