

## The Desirability of Rare Alpines in the Trade

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### INTRODUCTION

When I first started growing alpine plants as a student at Ingwersen's nursery in Sussex, the industry was very different from the one we know today. The market for alpine plants was mainly split between retail sales direct from the nursery and mail order. There were relatively few wholesale nurseries supplying garden centres.

The current decade has seen a large surge in the market for alpines. Many small retail nurseries have launched themselves onto the circuit of horticultural and other types of shows in the U.K., both direct selling and as a way of publicising their mail-order business.

But where have all the rarer alpines gone? Nurseries seem to have been forced to mass produce fewer lines for sale to the public at their popular shows. This has led to an upsurge of trade for mass production propagators of plug plants, churning out countless seedlings of lewisias, dianthus, saxifrages, and campanulas. However, the demand from the retail industry is for choice cultivars and rarity, as well as for large quantities of common plants. The gardening public has an increasing awareness of the unusual plants they see in botanic gardens and private collections and, of course, in gardening magazines and TV programmes.

This should be where the small specialist nursery comes into its own. As well as joining the band-wagon with the common taxa, we should be looking at ways of filling the gap in demand for more unusual plants by supplying rarer species or new introductions to cultivation. Many of these are less profitable because of heavy losses in production and longer production times so costs need to be offset against more profitable "bread and butter" lines.

Our aim should be to propagate more lines from seed, preferably from known sources, as well as looking at new possibilities from tissue culture.

### PROPAGATION

Even for many of the more unusual lines, seed propagation is straightforward. Seed can be sown in a standard loamless seed compost with added vermiculite and covered with fine grit. Sowing should be made in December, or whenever seed becomes available. A natural chilling should be given, with trays placed in cold frames over winter.

As soon as germination takes place, good light is essential and pricking out into cell trays as soon as possible is necessary. Propagators may prefer to direct sow some larger seeds such as *Cremanthodium* and *Saussurea*, to reduce root disturbance in these sensitive genera.

With subjects such as cyclamen and hepatica, seeds can be space sown into cell trays but it is essential that it is sown fresh as soon as it is collected. The same is true with pulsatilla and adonis.

For many of the rarer alpines to be grown successfully it is useful to understand a little of their cultural requirements by looking at the conditions they experience in nature, before attempting to grow them in cultivation.

For example, *Dicentra peregrina* is a rare plant growing in volcanic screes in Japan. This is why it grows very well in pumice aggregates in cultivation. It flowers profusely in late spring and as the flowers are pollinated and fertilised the pink colour changes to a deeper red. At this point the flower can be carefully detached to reveal a clutch of six to 10 ripe seeds which should be sown right away.

*Lewisia rediviva* is another choice plant whose seeds ripen while the plant is still in flower. This is known as bitter root in its native U.S.A. However, with this plant the seed does not lose its viability and can be sown around December.

### **PROFITABILITY OF GROWING RARER PLANTS**

I was interested to meet a Japanese alpine grower recently who seemed to be able to experience a lifestyle that did not seem to fit with the kind of income normally associated with alpine growing. He told me he earned a good income from selling a plant called *Tussilago*, which we know in the U.K. as the pernicious weed, coltsfoot. He forced them into flower for one of the Japanese festivals, sprayed them with growth retardant and apparently they sell like hot cakes.