

Growing Auriculas for Pleasure

James Smallwood happily admitted that Auriculas are his passion, and he shared some of that with us. Despite the Hall projector being uncooperative, we finally saw his plants in all their glory. Some people call them "meticulous Auriculas", so are they fussy or not? James thought not, provided that you plant them in the right soil and the right spot. Auriculas are native to the Alps; Pyrenees and Dolomites, and are members of the Primula family so are hardy and tough. Sometimes they are referred to as Mountain Cowslips or Auricula Ursi or bear's ear. James' interest was sparked after being asked to help famed Auricula grower Bill Lockyer with his stall at Chelsea. This became a lifelong friendship and shared love of the plant. There are over 5600 different varieties, having become popular during the 19th Century. It is thought possible they were introduced by French Huguenots in the late 1590s, but were then rarities, only afforded by the rich.

There was a fashion for "theatres" with plants potted singly and staged against a black background in frames to show off their colour and form. Many of the original varieties have been lost; stripes were lost in the 1950s but are now reintroduced. Auriculas are noted for the presence of a fine waxy substance on the petals known as "Farina", carried on the tips of fine hairs. Its function is unknown but this gives the Auricula flower its unique appearance. It may be white or golden coloured, or dusted over the petals to give a cloudy appearance. There are four classes: Borders, Alpines, Doubles and Shows; the latter being subdivided into Selves, Edges, Fancies and Stripes. James showed us some stripes, having ragged edges and striped petals. "Arundell" is a violet and white, while "Sword" is a double edged green, very different. It is best to buy them from an approved supplier. Cross pollination can produce a huge variety of colours and effects.

Alpines are perhaps the easiest to grow. James recommended Drointon Nurseries in Ripon (www.auricula-plants.co.uk). If growing in pots, you must re-pot them every year, inspect the roots and replenish the compost. This should be equal parts of John Innes 2 or 3, multipurpose compost and grit or perlite, putting a half inch of grit in the bottom of the pot. Roots can become overlong and "carrot like" so shorten them and apply flowers of sulphur or rooting powder to the cut. Although auriculas like water they can become waterlogged so plastic pots are best avoided.

Remove algal growth from pots using Steradent! Auriculas like fresh air and drainage. Don't overpot and give them very little water in winter. They don't like the sun so keep them cool and shaded. Remove discoloured leaves and watch out for vine weevils. Red spider mite can be sprayed using water and rosemary oil. Mist plants in the summer to keep cool. Aphids can be removed with meths on a cotton bud. The plants produce offsets, which you can tease apart and plant on, so increasing your stock.

James brought along some plants for sale, and they were quickly snapped up. His enthusiasm and humour made for a very informative and entertaining talk. Even if you think they are rather fussy, their unusual beauty surely makes them worth a try.

Jan Still