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GARDENS OF IDEAS 2

GROWING 4,400 ALPINES IN BIRMINGHAM

The natural habitat of alpine plants is mountains, clear air and climatic extremes. Roy Elliott grows them in opposite conditions. By H. E. BATES

As a young man I was a burning, even slightly fanatical enthusiast for alpines; the bug bit me good and hard. Winter nights were dedicated to the purple if slightly testy gospel according to Reginald Farrer; catalogues of alpines arrived by every post; I collected and voraciously read innumerable books on them; with the help of a strong but gentle old Cornishman and a raw and powerful Kentish youth I quarried great moss-clothed lumps of ragstone from a disused quarry and built my first and only rock garden, driven on by dream visions of soldanellas, androsaces, gentians, lewisias, primulas and infinite numbers of other high mountain treasures.

Alas! for alpine dreams on a too rich soil, in damp winters, at a hundred feet above sea level. Of all the hundreds of species I once grew, only magical drifts of winter crocus remain, having seeded and naturalised themselves over the past 35 years with a prodigality that year by year provides five months of joy from November to March.

Clearly such dedication as I had wasn't dedicated enough; obviously my horticultural will was too weak to win the relentless battle against climate and altitude. Such charges cannot

ALPINE plants from 30 countries come together in Roy Elliott's collection. More than 400 of the more fragile specimens are housed under glass (left), but another 4,000 plants flourish in the open air, in the imaginatively planned rock garden (below) which Elliott has created from his suburban quarter-acre. The rock garden looks an entirely natural creation, and dwarf conifers prevent monotony of height. Cyril Young, 46 (right), an enthusiastic alpine-grower, left a job as a clerk ten years ago to become Elliott's full-time gardener

Photographs by Dmitri Kasterine

however, be made against Mr Roy Elliott, a 51-year-old Birmingham engineer who has shown that real dedication in the matter of growing alpines can accomplish miracles, even in Birmingham, which is saying a great deal.

Roy Elliott's garden is not large; indeed rather less, I should say, than a quarter of an acre. It is also suburban, lying as it does in one of those presentable streets of tidy villas with diamond leaded windows built in the mid or late twenties, not more than a couple of miles from what is the nightmare of the new Birmingham city centre struggling to get through its birth pains: a palpably dreadful mess of what Ian Fleming called the packet-of-fags-on-end school of architecture interspersed with a few of the old satanic mills in that typical hard Midland red brick, depressing alike to the eye, the heart and the soul.

Nor is Birmingham particularly renowned for extreme purity of atmosphere; a vast weight of soot falls on it, thereby providing the very worst condition under which alpines could be expected to flourish, the air of the purlieus about New Street Station being a poor substitute for the celestial draughts of the Kleine Scheidegg. In spite of these daunting conditions Roy Elliott grows a truly vast number of alpines from places as far apart as Japan and the Andes, New Zealand and Turkestan: a total of more than 4,000 in all, together with another 400 in his alpine houses, a big enough figure to make even Kew sit up.

The prime essentials in building a rock garden are first that the rock should look perfectly natural, never, never artificial; that it should be aesthetically pleasing to the eye, above all having an air of permanence, and never, never looking like the newly-dug grave of an elephant stuck about all over the place with stark perpendicular tombstones; and above all that it should provide the perfect habitat for plants demanding perfect drainage and cool root run, the arch enemy of true alpines being the torrents not of spring, but winter.

In addition to all this it needs to be imaginatively planted. Many alpines being minute of stature it is wholly essential to avoid monotony of height or lack of it, so that a judicious use of dwarf shrubs, for the most part conifers, is both desirable and necessary.

All these things I at once looked for in Roy Elliott's back garden—and a back garden is exactly what it is—and immediately found that /continued

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he had built well, imaginatively and to the rules. The reddish-grey sandstone of the Midlands, as opposed to the water-worn limestone of the North and the green-cheese ragstone of the South, is not one of which I am specially fond and I got a faint impression that perhaps Roy Elliott didn't have a very great affection for it either, in spite of which he has used it well, avoiding the over-large lumps that would have completely disjointed his small and inevitably cramped terrain, at the same time breaking up the pattern with flights of steps both practical and unobtrusive, a pool or two and some positively tiny areas of lawn.

The whole effect is very pleasing to the eye, so pleasing in fact that as I looked it seemed an opportune moment in which to ask him what he thought of the new rock garden at Kew. "Bloody awful," he promptly said, which it undoubtedly is, looking as it does like a ghastly and depressing marriage between the bear garden at the Zoo and a section of trenches, in solidified brown mud, left over from the Battle of the Somme.

I must here confess that I have sometimes detected a certain whiff of snobbery among alpine fanatics. They tend to look down on mere delphinium lovers, dahlia enthusiasts, rosarians and so on as being of a lesser breed. Because their treasures are from high altitudes they seem to feel, perhaps, that they are spiritually closer to the gates of Heaven than, say, chrysanthemums.

I detected none of this in Roy Elliott, who when I asked him which were the most treasured and rare of his treasures modestly gave me the names of a mere five out of more than 4,000. One of these, *Pyxidanthera barbulata* (formerly *Diapensia barbulata*) is, according to Farrer, one of "a race of shrubs so minute as to be smaller than the smallest plants", on which he elaborated in typical fashion: "in the most beautiful imported sods that are one sheet of wee russet foliage quite hidden by the profuse pearl-white rounded stars that sit almost close all over it . . . the whole plant having a remote—or very remote—resemblance to the saxifrage that says it is like them."

Roy Elliott collects none of these treasures himself but has part shares in expeditions which do. These cover some 30 countries and would cover still more if some of the richest territories that were happy hunting grounds in the days of Kingdon Ward, E. H. Wilson and Farrer were not now behind closed frontiers. Unhappily Tibet and Nepal are locked behind the highest of barriers, though places like Turkey, Turkestan, Iraq and Iran still provide rich yields.

It is interesting to note, by the way, that few parts of the world still remain unbotanised, the notable exceptions being, rather surprisingly, parts of China and the Andes. Not that the extent to which the world has been scoured for plants should itself surprise us when we remember that it is more than 300 years since the Tradescants, father and son, were already globe-trotting in the name of botany.

One other feature of Roy Elliott's garden is of more than ordinary interest. In addition to an alpine house where his more susceptible species are guarded from the killing damp of winter he has also built himself a wall, or rather a cliff, under glass. This precipitous affair is composed of a substance called tufa, a curious natural conglomerate of lime and soft rock in which plants such as lewisias appear to revel happily. As a backdrop to this he has planted camellias, glossy of leaf and fat with bud.

It was as long ago as 1936 that tufa was apparently first referred to as a medium for the cultivation of alpines by Clarence Elliott. At about the same time an American alpine enthusiast came across it in Central New York State under the name of "horse-bone". This was thrown out as an intolerable nuisance by farmers ploughing rough ground, only to be discovered as an excellent medium for growing alpines when the alpine bug hit the Americans about as hard as it hit us here.

Roy Elliott used something like six tons of it in building his cliff, his source of supply being North Wales, and it is apparently an almost perfect medium for the smaller lime-loving alpines such as drabas, saxifrages and androsaces. It is however scarce in these islands, though there is now available a manufactured substitute called hypertufa, a composition consisting of a cement mixture with the addition of peat. This, it seems, does just as well as the real thing and can also be made up into containers, troughs and sinks for alpine cultivation.

Roy Elliott's activities do not end with the growing of alpines. He also edits the Quarterly Bulletin of the Alpine Gardening Society, a publication well worth mentioning. Unlike many bulletins and magazines put out by various gardening societies, which are all too often like enfeebled and semi-literate hybrids between a bad school magazine and the worst kind of parish magazine—one I regularly receive always looks and reads as if mocked up by some printer's hack in a darkened back-street basement—it is a splendidly professional, well-informed, intelligent and lively job, not the least attractive feature of which being the many photographs of alpines, most of them, not surprisingly, from the camera of Roy Elliott himself.

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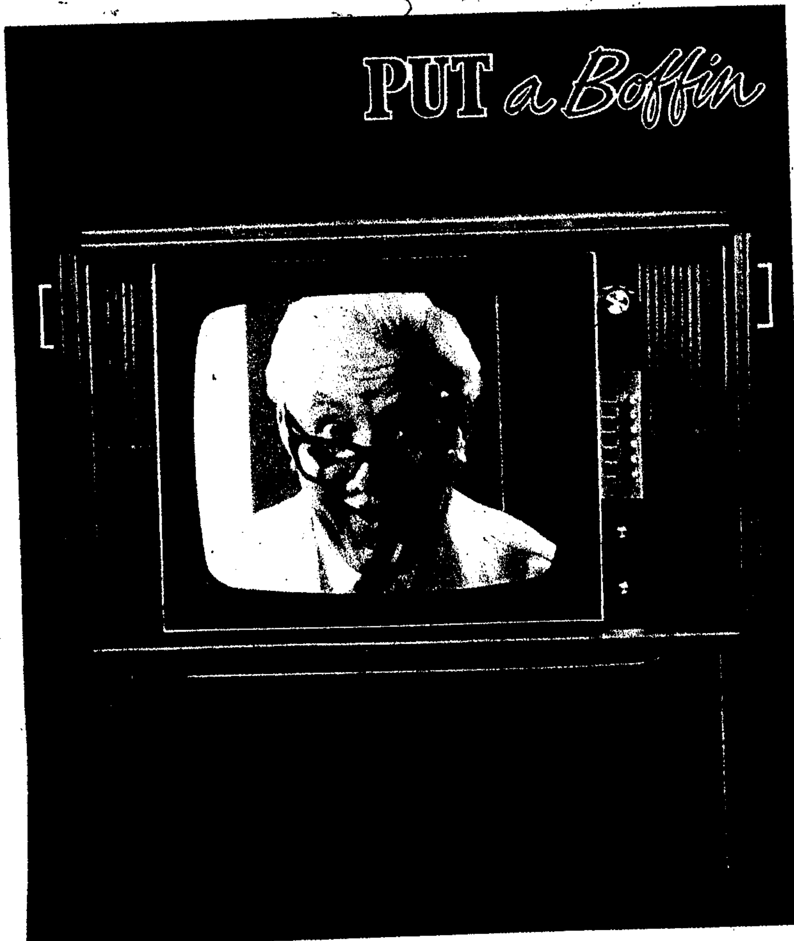
March 29: H. E. Bates visits Cecil Beaton's garden and large conservatory in Wiltshire



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