



Nodding demurely among the forget-me-nots, *Geum* Herterton Primrose is an alluring cultivar raised at Herterton House, Northumberland

## Some like it hot

*National Collection of Geum, Frittenden, Kent*

Mark Griffiths explores a collection of boldly coloured rose-relations with 'something of the herbal, the meadow and the hedgerow' in their bearing

Photographs by Julian Nieman

WITH commendable calm, Sue Martin tells me that *Geum* Dawn is 'a good plant' and 'very vigorous'. I think it's nothing less than sensational. From a tuft of handsomely lobed leaves, it sends up slim maroon stalks from April until September. These bear semi-double flowers, which nod demurely before lifting their heads to show radiant faces. Broad and frilled, the petals are soft yellow, tricked with peach. It is indeed vigorous, and easy to grow.

But I know at once that *Geum* Dawn belongs to that select group of perennials that sometimes suffer with me—so bewitching that I keep them hanging around indoors, loath to commit them to the earth. Dawn will sit on my desk in potted perfection, hating each minute of my loving attention.

Dawn's raiser, Sue Martin, began gardening in childhood, learning from her mother

and grandmother. In the 1980s, she became fascinated by perennials, joining the Kent Group of the Hardy Plant Society. Her present garden, at Frittenden in Kent, was 'all vegetables' when she moved there in 1988. 'I decided to make a yellow border, and then I added something orange. That was my first *Geum*, and it liked my soil. I found others at nurseries and plant sales, and I was given a few. After a while, I was having problems naming them all, so I visited the National Collection of *Geum* in Devon.' That collection passed to Mrs Martin, who now tends some 75 *Geum* species and varieties, and hundreds of plants, on her quarter-acre of Wealden clay.

*Geum* is an excellent example of what a National Collection can achieve. Two species of these herbaceous members of the rose family have long been familiar to us: our native *Geum rivale* (Water

Avens) and *G. urbanum* (Herb Bennet). In the 19th century, two scarlet-flowered species were introduced, *G. coccineum* from the Balkans, and *G. chilense* from Chile. These were used in hybridisation, producing many orange- and red-flowered cultivars that went in and out of fashion, becoming more muddled (and sometimes lost altogether) as time wore on. Meanwhile, botanists were discovering new species. Currently, about 60 are recognised, scattered worldwide from the mountains of New Zealand to the tundra of Alaska.

There's an intrinsic scientific value in knowing and growing these plants. But, recently, our tastes have put *Geum* back on the gardening menu. There's a yearning ➤

**Facing page** Part of Mrs Martin's *Geum* collection grows in raised rectangular beds among euphorbias and forget-me-nots

















Above **Geum Bell Bank**. Preceding pages  
The apricot-petalled **Geum Hannays**



The inimitable **Geum Hilltop Beacon** is  
a hot contender in shades of tangerine



The unusually upward-facing **Geum**  
**Abendsonne** is of the 'evening sun' variety



Springtime at 1, Brickwall Cottages is a joyous celebration of cottage-garden flowers

for plants with quieter looks and something of the herbal, the meadow and the hedge-row about them. Few answer that yearning better than our own bashful beauty *Geum rivale* and its offspring, such as the coppery rose Leonard's Variety. And so, cometh the hour, cometh the National Collection: thanks to Sue Martin, we know with confidence what's available, what it's called, and how to grow it. She has produced an excellent handbook on *Geum*, one of a series that Plant Heritage publishes. It would publish more, given more donations. One day, she hopes to travel to South America in search of new *Geum* seeds, 'but the difficulty now is time. A collection keeps you so busy'. Meanwhile, we can buy plants from her, and some will be her creations, like the lovely Dawn.

Part of Mrs Martin's collection grows in raised rectangular beds. Their antique physic-garden charm seems entirely appropriate for plants that were once of such medicinal importance to us (the name Herb Bennet is derived from *Herba benedicta*, 'the blessed herb'). But these jewels don't need to be kept in boxes. 'They like so many spots,' says Mrs Martin, 'and people only lose them because their crowns become

woody and exhausted. If you divide them in autumn or early spring every three years, they go on and on. The Rivale-types will flourish in very damp conditions and prefer some shade. The orange and red Chiloense- and Coccineum-types need less moisture and shade, but they will scorch in full, all-day sunlight, and they don't like to dry out. One of the great points in their favour is that these are hot-coloured plants that thrive in a cool place. Another is that they seem to be flowering more freely now our winters are cold again.'

She's absolutely right about hot plants for cool places. We have the amber *Geum* Hilltop Beacon in damp shade beside golden woodrush and the bronze-leaved fern *Dryopteris erythrosora*. All spring and summer, its flowers float like fireflies. There's nothing for it—*Geum* Dawn is going to have to join them.

Sue Martin, 1, Brickwall Cottages, Frittenden, Kent (01580 852425). The garden is open by appointment and on various days from May 3 under the National Gardens Scheme ([www.ngs.org.uk](http://www.ngs.org.uk)). For more information on Plant Heritage, visit [www.plantheritage.com](http://www.plantheritage.com) or telephone 01483 447540

### The pleasure of a collection

There are some 450 National Plant Collections (and rising). Each is focused on a genus—*Geum*, for example. They are the main work of Plant Heritage, formerly known as the NCCPG, a voluntary organisation that, beside the RHS and NGS, amply proves that the Big Society has long been a fact of life for British gardeners. Founded in 1978, Plant Heritage aims to conserve, study and increase the wealth of plants in British gardens. This charity protects not only our horticultural treasures, but also the planet's wild plants, propagating and disseminating species that are endangered or extinct in nature. Some of its collections are held by institutions such as Kew; many are held by individuals like Sue Martin. The funding available to collection-holders is minimal. Most of them spend their own money, and incalculable amounts of time. It's only possible to maintain these collections because they are scattered among devoted custodians. But because they're scattered, it's easy to forget the resource they comprise. If they were assembled in one place, it would be a botanic garden on a scale that no government is now prepared to contemplate.