

Gardening Group Report for February by Sue

Heidi Varley is a woman on a mission - to provide, local, usual and most importantly scented flowers. A local girl, she originally wanted to go to agricultural college and be a farmer, but life took a different path and moving to London she worked in telecommunications and publishing. Her mother Pat wanted to study horticulture but was badly advised and took up hairdressing and later nursing. After Heidi was made redundant in 2014 and following a series of part time jobs, she saw a newspaper article in 2018 about a revival of the flower industry in the UK. Mother and daughter are now working together following their dreams.

The 1950's was the beginnings of the Dutch flower industry, the government buying small farms and providing energy subsidies allowing the growers an advantage over other countries, and by the 1980's British growers could not compete, many ceased trading. The 1990's saw the supermarkets demanding cheaper flowers, and although the Dutch government had reduced their subsidies, florists and supermarkets were dependant on Holland. Dutch imports amount to 691 million whereas the British market only accounts for 82 million and 90% of all flowers go through the Dutch wholesalers, regardless of where they are grown.

As concern for the environment grows questions are being asked - where do flowers come from, what are conditions like for the workers and what is the carbon footprint of importing all these flowers? Heidi and Pat enrolled on an RHS horticultural course and made plans for their garden, to be named Pink's after her Hungarian Vizsla dog, Miss Pink. In September 2018, work began with the delivery of topsoil, followed by the erection of a deer and rabbit proof fence. Raised beds were created and hundreds of bulbs planted. Most flower farmers advise planting shrubs for greenery and these were duly ordered with help from Egglestone Hall, lovely when they were ordered, a rather daunting task when they arrived and had to be planted, as were the David Austin roses, which ended up being planted in the dark to get them into the ground. Once the beds were created, they were lightly forked to remove any stones or weeds, then the "no dig" method is used.

Pink's are part of 'Flowers from The Farm' a co-operative of 700 growers, formed to promote local growers who cannot compete with supermarkets, but can provide different varieties and scented flowers. Although not a trained flower arranger, Heidi was asked if she could make a floral Land rover, for the Barnard Castle 1940's weekend. Of course she agreed, then panic set in how would she do it? She contacted the renowned arranger Fiona Pickles and as luck would have it Fiona was coming to Lartington Hall for a photo shoot and invited Heidi along. Following that meeting she asked Heidi to work with her at Chatsworth to create a huge dried flower arrangement, which needed 500 jam jars for a "wall" of grasses.

Floral foam (Oasis) is essentially plastic, the dust which comes off it is not good for you, in water it turns to micro particles, not good for the oceans, and it is not biodegradable. The RHS is to ban the use of floral foam at Chelsea from 2021, so what do you use instead? Chicken wire or twigs, fruit and veg, moss, floral test tubes, jam jars, good old-fashioned vases.

At Pinks flowers are dried throughout the year and made into wreaths in the winter. Fresh flowers available every Friday at Peircebridge Farm shop and Egglestone Hall. Star Flowers in Barnard Castle also have Pink's flowers available.

Our continuing programme

6th March. Wallington Hall, to see 100,000 purple and yellow crocuses. Coach now fully booked. Leave Addison's, Barnard Castle at 9am

3rd April. Stainton Village Hall, Keeley Metcalfe, Design for year-round interest.

1st May. Himalayan Garden

5th June. Beningbrough Hall and Gardens (NT)

3rd July. Helen Bainbridge's garden, Stokesley and Mount Grace Priory

7th August. Longframlington garden.

If you are interested in any of these trips please contact Pauline Fawcett on 01833 638020 or pvfawcett@tiscali.co.uk