

Above : *a Miniature Garden*
Hugh McAlary, Ulster Show 2026

Front Cover – *Primula reidii williamsii*
Anne Hughes Ulster Show 2026

THE ALPINE GARDEN SOCIETY
ULSTER GROUP



Newsletter No. 25, August 2026

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Editorial

What a summer – sun, heat but little rain – well we gardeners, like farmers, have to complain about something but in Northern Ireland we have been more fortunate than gardeners in Southern England. It is a wake-up call to climate change, and we will have to learn how to manage our gardens to cope with extremes of wet and dry.

In the Alps this summer I was amazed by how much the snow had retreated from visits over 30 years ago, but we still found alpines. It was the existence of these tiny, beautiful flowers blooming in the harshest of conditions that attracted me to alpines then and I hope that in the future alpine gardeners will continue to succeed in both growing and showing them.

Over this past year we have said goodbye to some of our greatest gardeners and plantsmen including our much loved President, Kay. What a legacy they have left us and I am sure, like me, as you walk round your garden there are so many plants in our gardens that bring back memories of friends both past and present. Tributes are paid on the following pages to those who have inspired and will continue to inspire gardeners in the years to come.

Once again thanks to all committee and members who organise meetings, shows, and garden visits which we all enjoy so much. They don't just happen and I would encourage all our members to take a turn on committee as none of us are experts and we can all learn together.

Apologies for not involving everyone to subscribe articles this time but due to a summer 'flu-like illness this is very much a last minute newsletter. It has made me realise that after 25 years it's time for change and no one is indispensable. As communication via internet, social media, etc. becomes more widespread and the cost of printing & posting rises, the committee can decide about future newsletters. While I have enjoyed recording the activities of the Ulster Group over the years there are so many new members with fresh ideas to keep the group active and interesting for the next 25 years and many more.

Joan McCaughey Ed.

Last Words

While we are saddened and will greatly miss the members who have died in the past year we also have many happy memories of time spent together. They all contributed much to the Ulster AGS Group and the Irish gardening world so no apologies for more 'Last Words' than usual to remind us and celebrate their lives.

Kay Dunlop - Past President



Family, friends and members gathered in Groomsport at the end of April to pay our last respects to Kay where her nephew, Stewart Dunlop, in his eulogy, brought back a picture of Kay which, I am sure, she would have loved. Stewart's words are so much more eloquent than mine and he has kindly agreed to let me use his, though I have only room for some extracts- please do ask for the full tribute.

"Kay the optimist, Kay the forward planner, Kay the indomitable traveller along the path of life. She seemed destined to just keep on going.

Kay's life was not only one of great duration, but it was also one of great depth of colour. To borrow a floral metaphor, Kay was no shrinking violet. She made an impression. You were left in her wake. You were never in doubt about Kay's views.

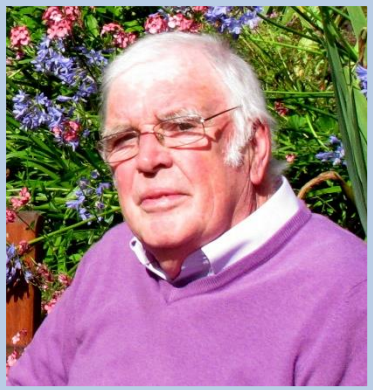
But it is Kay the person – and her particular place in each of our lives – that we remember especially today. She didn't suffer fools gladly, or at all. There was nothing beige or anodyne in Kay's makeup. She knew her own mind and was ready and willing to share it.

But it is as a plantswoman that I, and many of us here, will remember her best. She was a lover of plants, a plant connoisseur.

She was much in demand on the radio and as a judge for "Ulster in Bloom" casting her gimlet eye – as Bertie Wooster would say – over floral displays across the Province before delivering her withering judgement. She was truly a great supporter of Ireland's gardening life. "

Meetings will not be the same without Kay and we all owe her our thanks for all she did for the Ulster Group.

Joe Kennedy – by Pat Crossley

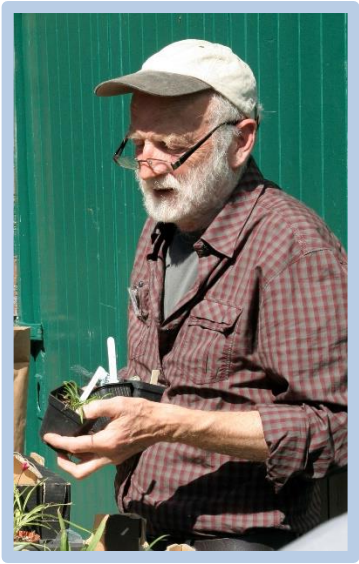


'Joe Kennedy who died at the age of 90 at the end of 2025, was a highly regarded member of the Ulster Group, and a valued Committee Member. Joe also was a highly respected member of the Irish Garden Plant Society, and was made an Honorary Member for his outstanding contribution to Irish horticulture. By profession he was a schools' dentist, and I'm sure his lovely Carlow brogue calmed many a frightened child! It was only after retirement that that he began breeding Irish primroses, and typically of the man that he was, said they were his gift to the world. Joe was an avid supporter of both Ulster and Dublin Shows and delighted members and the general public with his exquisite exhibition of Irish primroses. Along with Brendan Sayers he coauthored a chapter on Irish primroses in the book – Heritage Irish Plants- Plandai Oidhreachta.

He was also an accomplished artist, keen golfer, loved animals, and regularly in retirement gave many hours gardening voluntarily at Corrymeela. This was a special place for Joe, where a celebration of his life was held with friends invited to reminisce their part in Joe's colourful life.'

Thanks to Pat for these words as, due to ill health, we didn't see much of Joe in recent years but he will be remembered by the many Irish primrose cultivars he created including 'Dark Rosaleen'.

David Ledsham



Liam and I, along with Mark Smyth, were privileged to represent the AGS at a celebration of David's life, conducted by Janet, his wife, in February. With his artistical background, David and Janet created a magical garden full of unusual plants at their home near the Sallagh Braes, visited by many members. Again due to illness he was not able to attend meetings recently but in the past David was a stalwart of the plant stall. A gifted plantsman, he wrote instructive articles including irises, hellebores and trilliums, available in earlier newsletters. A lecturer in the College of Art, our pictures are of David teaching children, among others, how to sow seeds and giving them seedlings at our stall at the Belfast Spring and Autumn Shows. There must be many members, like me, who will always be reminded of David by the many trees and shrubs growing in their garden that were propagated by him – another talented plantsman who will be missed.

Gary Dunlop

- Being of a reserved and retiring nature, many of our members will not have known Gary though, in the past, he donated not only plants to the Ulster AGS group but also a generous sum of money, insisting it was given anonymously, of course. I remember visiting his nursery at Ballyrogan, Newtownards, which John Richards on his visit many years before, described the 5 acres as 'one of the most species-rich collections he had ever encountered'. While his day job was in the architectural side of hospital management, Gary will be remembered as a plantsman who propagated many Irish cultivars which are recorded in Charles Nelson's book 'A Heritage of Beauty'.

Molly Taylor

- Molly was a long-standing member of the Ulster Group. Along with her husband, Robert, who died last year, they both attended meetings and outings and, when she was able Molly played an active role at the monthly meeting. Our society would not survive without members like Molly who give their support year after year.

Seamus O'Brien



While not a local member, Seamus was so well known and had given a talk to the Ulster Group in the past. Those of us who attended Termonfeckin last November and enjoyed Seamus's lectures and company, found it hard to believe he was no longer with us. Writer, traveller, plantsman, speaker and, above all, the force behind the re-creation of Kilmacurragh where he had an encyclopaedic knowledge of every plant – he had so much more to give. Always remembering and greeting you by name, I am sure I am not the only one whose day was brightened by his warm smile. Described by David Maxwell in a tribute in The Ulster Garden as 'a national treasure' he will be sorely missed.

Our sympathy goes to all the friends and families of the above as well as to our members who have family bereavements in the past year. Also our thoughts are not only with them but all those who have had serious illnesses recently and are no longer able to attend meetings. While not wanting to intrude on anyone's grief or pain if there is any way members can help please just ask.

Garden Events

Snowdrops.



The New Year is always brightened and cheered by a 'Snowdrop Day' and this year was our turn for a luncheon and lecture. We were all delighted to hear Paddy Tobin from Waterford give a well-illustrated talk about his garden - 'A Snowdrop Garden' after luncheon in the Kingfisher Hotel. Not only did we have a talk but were able to buy interesting bulbs from a selection brought by Jules from their Esker Farm Daffodil Nursery – a great day was had by all.

The Snowdrop Gala in Carlow run by Hester Forde and Robert Miller from Altamont Gardens always attracts a large crowd and this year was no exception



in spite of storms and power cuts - had to include this picture of our AGS members with John Massey, Ashwood Nurseries, one of the Speakers.



Also, two Ulster member gardens opened to show their snowdrops to other groups - the McKelveys to the Dublin AGS and McCandless' to the IGPS.

Exotic Fern Day at Mount Stewart

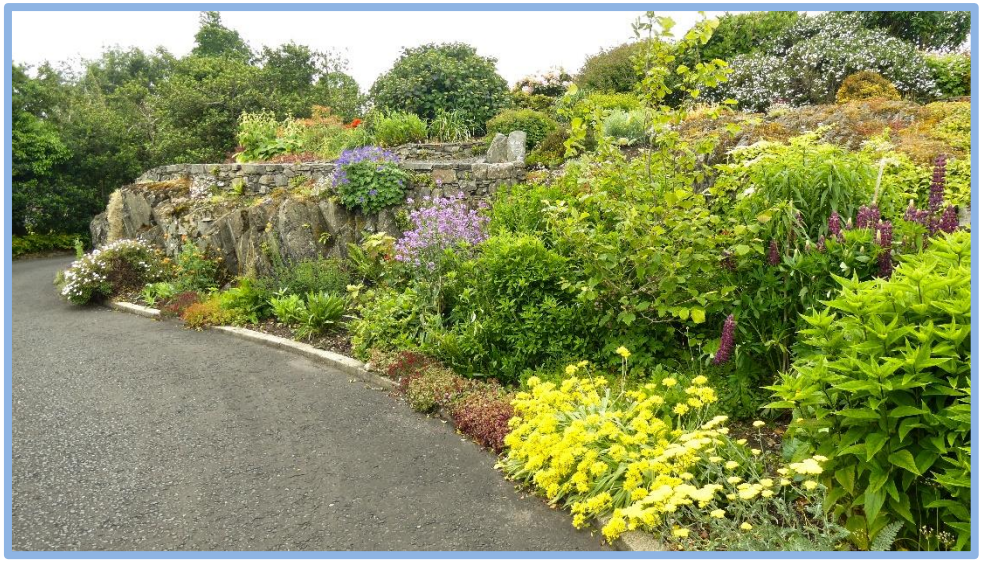
An Exotic Fern Day at Mount Stewart in May was co-ordinated by Gordon Finch with various clubs including the AGS invited. After two lectures by experts in the field of exotic ferns, Lady Rose very kindly entertained us all to refreshments in the drawing room. She also took a keen interest in the planting of tree ferns, supervising the planters including Hugh and Arlene in the afternoon. The visit also included a tour of the garden with the acting Head Gardener, Rob Wilson - always a worthwhile experience.





Drumaness

In June we were privileged to visit Bridget McDonald's garden at Drumaness. Bridget was one of the contestants in the BBC 'Greatest Gardens' TV programme – (personally I think they were all winners as each garden was different and unique in its own way - so **congratulations to all**). Drumaness is a natural rock garden on a very large scale, and it is difficult to do it justice in a few pictures or even on the TV programme.



Bridget has made great use of the natural rock crevices and screes, all expertly planted with many alpine plants that just seem to belong. While there were many unusual cultivated plants, I was amazed to find tall specimens of navelwort apparently growing naturally on the walls. The garden had also many rare shrubs and trees with a flowering cornus framing the view to the pond area, and ornamental deer again placed in the ideal setting. Much more time was needed to do justice to this expansive garden. We were also treated to tea and cakes, and Bridget generously gives the garden donations to her charity, Multiple Sclerosis.





Rosie Maye Garden Outing

At the beginning of August, we embarked on a comfortable Giles Coach travelling south to visit the Ratoath Garden Centre and Rosie Maye's garden with lunch included at Grangegeeth. The plants at Ratoath, many beautifully displayed in the centre garden, tempted many and rapidly filled the luggage compartment of the bus. After a relaxing lunch we were then off to visit Mullaghdillon House set in the beautiful countryside of Co. Meath with the Hill of Slane in the background. Rosie Maye, 'The Insomniac Gardener', is well known to members from her talk in January, a previous garden visit, as well as her frequent contributions to 'Gardeners Corner' but, for those like me, it was a special treat seeing it for the first time. It certainly did not disappoint with Rosie Maye herself giving us both a

detailed history and tour of the garden. Again, this is another very large garden that cannot be shown in a few pictures. I was particularly struck by her imaginative use of all sorts of containers especially the huge famine pots and, of course, the arrangement of plants and planting was superb.



Congratulations again to the organisers for a lovely day out and a small postscript - The Belfast Fleadh was on that week and travelling home on a packed train, with music fading into the background was an unforgettable experience. The buzz of interest created by my plants and the good atmosphere from the Fleadh was something that created harmony – music and plants are a great combination.



Showtime

Rain or no rain, sun or no sun ---- the show must go on so congratulations to all exhibitors, whether prize winners or not, who make the effort to put something on the show bench for Members, Ulster and Dublin Shows. Not only the exhibitors but also the show committee put a lot of hard work into the planning and organising to ensure all goes well on the day. It is an opportunity to introduce the general public to both alpine plants and the society and, of course, the chance to buy some excellent and rare plants. Make a note now to prepare that special plant for next year's shows as everyone is needed and, I am sure, any new ideas for show days would be welcome.



The Gold award winning display of daffodils by Esker Farm Nursery added to the Ulster Show this year with Martin Rogerson, AGS Shows Coordinator, presenting the prizes and the AGS Executive Secretary, Tony Bryan, standing in for the President. Once again here are some show pictures to inspire you for next year and a more detailed report is on the AGS website.

A special pleasure was to see the first Harold McBride Memorial trophy presented by his son Stuart to Billy Moore, Dublin.





Competing



Judging



Prizegiving



Winning !

AGS Ulster Show, 2026



Gladiolus tristis
Jules & Dave Hardy



Correa reflexa
Hilary & William McKelvey



Lewisiopsis tweedyi {Farrar Medal}
Martin Rogerson



Lewisia cotyledon [Hammer Trophy]
Patricia Kernohan



Bulbocodium vernum
Gordon Toner



Iris bucharica
Dave & Jules Hardy



Tulipa saxatilis
Brendan Sayers



Pleione Formosa 'Pink blush'
Frank Lavery



Hepatica nobilis 'Stained Glass'
Cavin Moore



Primula henricii
Billy Moore



Fritillaria acmopetala
Hugh McAlary



Daphne gemmata
Ann Hughes

AGS Ulster Show, 2026



Erica carnea 'Foxhollow'
Hugh McAlary



T. Clusiana chrysantha
Patricia Kernohan



Narcissus primigenius (From seed)
Joan McCaughey



Anemone appenina 'Alan Street'
Maeve Spotswood



Class 133 – Miniature Garden
Hugh McAlary



Erythronium 'Kinfauns Pink'
Dave & Jules Hardy



Narcissus 'Segovia'
Dave & Jules Hardy



Muscari 'Siberian tiger'
Cilla Dodd

News & Committee

Congratulations to both Hilary McKelvey and Cilla Dodd, two of the four recipients of the AGS Group Awards for outstanding service to local groups. This well-deserved recognition was made at the AGM and AGS Conference in Warwickshire last November - good to see that their work has been appreciated.





We can't thank members enough who give time to serve on committee as we tend to forget all the background work of committee meetings, contacting speakers, arranging halls etc. so a photo of some of them at Hilary McKelvey's home.

The committee however couldn't function without the support and encouragement of all the members who also help with teas, plant stalls and by simply being there.

Termonfeckin There is a great line up of speakers at Termonfeckin this year - Connor Smith, Jimi Blake and Diane Clements - so worth it even if you can only manage a day but the weekend is so enjoyable, getting to know folk.

A visit to the National Botanic Gardens (NBG), Glasnevin



In March this year both the Ulster and Dublin AGS Groups enjoyed a talk given by Jenny Wainwright-Klein on the Schachen Alpine Garden, Munich, organised by Caroline Pannell.

During her stay in Ireland Jenny paid a visit to the NBG, Glasnevin, arranged by Jamie Chambers. Along with a few members from both groups, we met gardener Stephen D'Arcy and as well as the rock garden there was an opportunity to see the work done behind the scenes, in the raised beds and tufa wall nursery (ingeniously built of hypertufa with tunnels made through with tights). These few photos of the visit might tempt a special visit there in the future.



Climate Change



Just before going to press we heard the sad news from Nepal of flooding from melting and falling ice glaciers in the Langtang valley. Sometimes referred to as 'The Valley of Glaciers' or 'Valley of Flowers', considered to be one of the most beautiful regions in Nepal, past AGS bulletins give descriptions of the 'Alpines of Langtang'.

The pictures above show the changes in the snow patterns that we found in the same month with one taken 30+ years later, in the Alps, but change is obviously happening all over mountainous areas. Having visited Nepal twice to admire its beautiful mountain scenery and exquisite alpines I also found its people so warm and friendly. Life in those high mountains can be very harsh and my heart goes out to the country that has seen such a huge loss of life. We send our sympathy to all who live and work in those high mountains and who have lost so much. Now when I look at many of the primulas, meconopsis, rhododendrons and all the alpines that originated in these areas, it makes us appreciate the importance of conservation and propagation for the enjoyment of future alpine gardeners.

Information

Venue **St Bride's Hall, Derryvolgie Avenue, Belfast - Saturday 2.30 p,m.**

Dues This year's dues remain at Single **£20**. Couple **£30**. Student at school/college **£5.** If you would like to pay direct our bank details are as follows: Alpine Garden Society Ulster Group. Sort code 93 84 91. Account number 13441016. Please include your name. Looking forward to seeing you all again in September.'

Hilary McKelvey *Hon. Treasurer*

You can also give your subscription at any meeting to our Membership secretary, Mrs Sandra Munro, who will update the records. It is also useful to have your email address. This will only be for use in the Group and with your permission in accordance with the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation). The subscription is for one year and only applies to the local group while dues to the main AGS must be sent direct.

Website and Social Media

Programmes, Newsletters, Show news, and information from earlier can all be found on the website - www.alpinegarden-ulster.org.uk. The website is currently being updated and made more accessible from mobile devices as well as traditional computers and iPads.

Hilary also asked me to remind everyone who is on **Facebook** or **Instagram** that they can find us on Facebook at Alpine Garden Society Ulster, and Instagram at alpinegardensoc.ulster

As usual your help is appreciated at meetings, whether helping at tea or special request – bringing **Plants for the Plant Stall.**

Programme 2026 – 2027

2026

September 19th — **Bethan Collerton** — Birmingham BG
"Managing Alpine Collections in Botanical Gardens"

Annual General Meeting

October 17th — **Rob Potterton** — Nettleton, Lincolnshire
"New Zealand 2019 – Plants, People and Gardens"

November 13th – 15th
Termonfeckin Weekend – Dublin Group.

November 21st — **Ian Young** — Belfast
"The Art of Bonsai"

December 12th — **Christmas Miscellany**
A chance for members to give short talks on their plants, their Gardens or their Travels. Mince Pies and Mulled Wine

2027

January 16th — **Colin Agnew** — Ballymena
"The Rustic Garden at Woodgrove"

February 20th — **Kevin Begley** — Limerick
"Coolwater Garden"

March 20th — **Tomas Raju & Thomas McCaw** — Spa, Ballynahinch
"Fernhill Cottage Garden"
Members' Show

April 3rd — **AGS Dublin Group Show, Cabinteely, Dublin 18**

April 24th — **AGS Ulster Group Show, Greenmount**