

Plant Hunting in the Midnight Sun

There is a certain mystique about the area that lies within the Arctic Circle; the land of the midnight sun (in summer) and constant night (in winter); most people associate it with either a polar landscape or arctic tundra. This is not what you find in the region around Tromsø!

Situated 2000km from the North Pole and in the far north west of Norway; Tromsø benefits from the last flourish of the gulf stream; giving it a highest summer temperature rarely in excess of 25C and winter temperatures no lower than -18C – a very similar range to the UK! This is sufficient for a huge diversity of native flora; but due to the shortness and intense light of the arctic summer most of it will be in full flower during July – the effect is spectacular.

This is the reason why the International Stauden (or Hardy Plant) Union (ISU) selected the area for a summer excursion under the guidance of Dr. Arve Elvebakk, Curator of Tromsø Botanic Garden (Tromsø University), who is also currently preparing a tourist guide to the botanical highlights of the region.

Tromsø Botanic Garden has already enjoyed a fair share of plaudits; Monty Don in his Around the World in 80 Gardens series included it in his top 5, this is well deserved but also slightly surprising given that much of the site is still under development. The garden does not have its own propagation facilities; most of the plant material has been purchased from two specialist local nurseries but key accessions in the Rhododendron collection were originally sourced from Glendoick Nursery in Scotland.

The site integrates well with the landscape of the surrounding city; it is open plan and admission is free. Plant theft and vandalism are not an issue – perhaps a reflection of the peculiar character of this relatively isolated city community. Opening is effectively limited to May to October, during the winter the whole site is submerged in snow and garden staff are confined to mostly indoor activities.

The unique geography and climate mean that the garden is an ideal showcase for the alpine flora of the world and the garden is partly divided into geographic regions. The Himalayan Blue Poppy (*Meconopsis baileyi*) is immediately striking in the 'Himalaya' area whilst 'Africa' contains a surprising range of hardy succulents including *Delosperma basuticum*. There are also areas dedicated to specific genera such as *Primula* and *Gentiana* which in late July look particularly stunning and a credit to Martin Hajman who is responsible for the rock garden areas. Hajman explains that developing the alpine areas involved bringing in a lot of carefully selected rocks, preferably with well weathered faces colonised by lichens to give the area an established look. As the cold attacks the rock and new crevices form, these are immediately exploited as niches to cultivate some of the more demanding alpine species.

Elvebakk values the exposure that Monty Don's series gave the gardens; it highlighted their unique characteristics and stimulated significant international interest. He now is keen to develop the potential of the wider Tromsø region which is of huge botanical interest. Good starting-points are the mountains and valleys surrounding Tromsø. Despite being so close to the city these areas attract relatively few visitors in the high summer (unlike the Alps!) and offer a sense of both seclusion and adventure; there are no issues with freedom to roam the wild places.

There are rare species of *Draba*, *Carex* and *Viola* to be found in areas where Reindeer might be found grazing under the husbandry of the Sami people..

The combination of botanical interest and accessibility determines that some of the most interesting sites to visit require car journeys of up to 90 minutes from Tromso. This includes a valley walk culminating in a mountain ascent in the Guolasjavri area, where a new suspension bridge will give splendid views to a dramatic waterfall. At the lower levels are dainty displays of *Linnaea borealis* whilst the insectivorous Common Butterwort (*Pinguicula vulgaris*) seems to be found everywhere in the region. The mountain areas further in along a gravel road close to the boundary with Finland presents the best selection of rare arctic plants. *Rhododendron lapponicum* and *Cassiope tetragona* flower profusely there in spring, and snowbed species such as *Ranunculus sulphureus* flower in late summer, although our views of this area were restricted by fog at the time of our visit.

Any visit to the region must feature a visit to the Sommaroya area, west of Tromso; this group of small populated Islands really demonstrates the full splendour of the arctic summer in the warmer regions. In a peculiar mix of peaty and calcareous soils there are a profusion of flowering plants familiar to British gardeners and growers ranging from *Saxifraga caespitosa* to *Sorbus aucuparia* and from mid-May to late July, with the benefit of the midnight sun, there is endless time to enjoy the natural beauty of the place.

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Inset Article: About the ISU: The International Perennial Plant Union

The International Hardy Plant Union (or International Stauden Union – ISU) is an organisation of about 500 perennial plant and tree nurseries, institutions and persons with a professional interest in perennials from 17 European countries, the USA, Canada and Argentina. There are only a limited number of members from the UK; an issue which the ISU President Jakob Hokema is keen to address. It is a professional, plant-focussed organisation that offers a range of networking opportunities such as the summer excursion described in this article. Additionally, each February a conference is held (in English) at a Horticultural Conference Centre in Grunberg, Germany. This offers a unique blend of reports from growers, plant hunters and scientists on latest developments in the hardy plant sector. Further details can be found at www.isu-perennials.org