# In the Company of Plantsmen©

**Allen Bush**
Jelitto Perennial Seeds, 125 Chenoweth Lane, # 301, Louisville, Kentucky 40207 U.S.A.
Email: allen.w.bush@gmail.com

## INTRODUCTION

In a recent talk in Raleigh, North Carolina, Tony Avent of Plant Delights Nursery described those of us, who are obsessed with plants and gardens, as being a little "odd." George Mitchell of Woodlanders Nursery in Aiken, South Carolina told me, at the same symposium, about the story of the nurseryman who had died, and met St. Peter at the Pearly Gates. They had a cordial chat and St. Peter finally asks the new arrival what he'd done for a living. He said he had spent his career as a nurseryman. St. Peter says, "Oh my God, you've lived your life in Hell."

George Mitchell's business partner, Bob McCartney, tells the interesting story about how *Amsonia hubrichtii* came into the trade. "… a teenage Ken Wurdack, who now works at the Smithsonian, was doing a lot of research on rare plants and travelling all over the South following up on old records, herbarium collections, etc. in the early 1980s. He shared a lot of material with us including *A. hubrichtii* that he had collected in Arkansas. Woodlanders first offered it, I think, in 1982." It took nearly 30 years before *A. hubrichtii* was awarded the Perennial Plant Association's 2011 Plant of the Year

So, we are odd and have demanding careers but I doubt too many of us would trade our careers for another. Another friend succinctly described heaven and hell, "Heaven is where you go for the weather. Hell is where you go for the company." I have kept wonderful company for a long time. Rather than being so odd and indifferent, the many men and women I have known in the plant world have shared their time, wisdom, and plants. They don't seem so odd at all — at least not to me. My life has been enriched enormously by their generosity. They embody the IPPS motto: To Seek and to Share.

## HERE ARE A FEW STORIES…

But, by all means, don't pass-up a trip to Hell if you get the chance. I'm speaking of Hell, Michigan. I'd first recommend you see the nearby bog for some extraordinary botanizing with Bob and Brigitta Stewart of Arrowhead Alpines. They can point out skunk cabbages and terrestrial orchids and will remind you to look out for rattlesnakes sunning on dry hummocks. But after mucking around for a couple of hours in the bog, on a hot August day, you'll want to cool off with a cold beer at the Dam Site Inn in Hell, Michigan.

Most of my life has been spent living in Louisville, Kentucky, or in the mountains of North Carolina near Fletcher, North Carolina. You'd need to travel to southwest China to find an area as rich as what's represented in the southeastern U.S.A. mixed mesophytic hardwood forests.

Wes Cowan was a college roommate at the University of Kentucky who, following graduation, made a remarkable archaeological discovery in the Red River Gorge. It was first presumed those seeds found in Kentucky had been domesticated, selected over millennia for improved performance, by indigenous people. But according to

research published in the Journal of Ethnobiology by C. Wesley Cowan and Bruce D. Smith (1993), these were wild seed and represented one of the most eastern U.S.A. locations of *Cucurbita pepo* var. *ozarkana*. Carbon dating tests confirmed that the Kentucky discovery of the Red River Gorge material was 4,500 years old. (The trail diverges here: More recent mitochondrial DNA studies suggest the possibility that var. *ozarkana,* may have been the progenitor for subsp. *ovifera*. And subsp. *ovifera*, according to mitochondrial DNA, could have given rise to the pumpkin. It's all a guessing game of haplotypes. In all likelihood, there were two probably distinct genetic lines.)

Well, alright. The pumpkin probably took shape in Mexico, and not Kentucky. But at least we had a historic role, as small as it may be, along a long trail of pepos. And Kentucky can lay claim to being the Lord of Gourds. And the important discovery of prehistoric seeds of Kentucky's native gourd predated the domestication of gourds by 2,500 years. Kentucky was at the center of early plant domestication. And another interesting bit of archaeological lore placed Kentucky in the top world centers of center of that early plant domestication Mesoamerica was renowned for corn. Kentucky became famous for lambs quarters, (*Chenopodium* species) not quite the big deal as corn.

During the time Wes and I lived together in Jessamine County, Kentucky, in the early to mid 1970s. We were taught how to garden by Elsie Lowery, a tobacco farmer, who patiently helped us with our first vegetable garden. What we learned from this experience was that I liked gardening — a lot! (And Wes Cowan found a new niche, a few years ago, on Public Television's The History Detectives.)

It was a few years before I met Clarence "Buddy" Hubbuch at Bernheim in 1978. By this time the intrigue of vegetables had given way to wildflowers and ornamentals. And Buddy was the local go-to expert who pursued his love of trees and shrubs with devotion and a renowned lack of ego. He seldom traveled to visit nurseries or gardens much beyond a day's drive from Clermont, Kentucky (across the road from the Jim Beam Distillery). But Buddy never had a dull day; he could entertain himself and never feel the need to wander far afield.

By the late 1970s I knew that plants, somehow, would be my life's work. I was fortunate to be able to spend a year in England at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew and would be from — that point — forever spoiled. I've kept in touch with a few from that year in 1978-79, but none is more fascinating than Tony Hall. Hall has retired — sort of. He was for nearly 30 years the Manager of Kew's Alpine Unit, caring for the alpine plants and bulbs and overseeing the Alpine House and Woodland Garden. Hall, renowned for his knowledge of Iris, is the leading authority on Juno Iris and working toward a botanic monograph. Kew continues to provide facilities for Hall's Juno Project.

Tony buzzed me in late May 2010. He was eager to get moving. A special package had just arrived: four bulbs and nearly fifty seeds of the very rare *Iris stocksii*.

Juan Piek, a South African, working for Security Forces in Afghanistan, found the juno iris in Kajaki, Helmand Province, and told Hall that he would put the collection in the mail. A month went by and Tony worried that it had gotten lost, but, fortunately, Piek had waited until he was safely home before posting the rare species. Piek was, according to Hall, "…a lover of plants, especially proteas…not especially junos."

In a battled scarred desert landscape, Piek ran the risk of landmines and avoided the crosshairs of feuding warlords and resurgent local terrorist networks. At stake in Helmand is the rich opium crop; 40% of the world's production comes from the Province, an area described by *The New York Times* as: "…Afghanistan's most dangerous land."

There may soon be a land rush there, too, since an internal Pentagon memo recently suggested Afghanistan might become the "Saudi Arabia of lithium." (Lithium is used to power laptops.) General Petraeus, Commander of U.S. Central Command (and just recently promoted), cited this vast reserve and other rich mineral deposits for its "stunning potential."

Not quite lost in this land grab has been Piek's prize, *I. stocksii*, whose vital DNA is being mapped at Kew. The "stunning potential" of this species will soon power-up the fertile imaginations of a few talented botanists, molecular scientists, and horticulturists, and, worldwide, there are a handful of us who can't wait to see what happens. We may have to wait awhile.

Tony Hall will try to try to mimic conditions indigenous to the dry, stony slopes of central and southern Afghanistan and neighboring Baluchistan, around Quetta, in western Pakistan — an elevation range between 1,150–2,700 m (3,773–8,858 ft). He'll grow the Iris in special glass frames for many years to come, trying to coax them into bloom. In nature, *I. stocksii* endures cold, dry winters and emerges with spring snowmelt, or the first rains, between March and April. After producing seeds, the plants soon go dormant again, surviving the intense summer heat (45 °C /113 °F) and prolonged dry period with the aid of fleshy roots and bulbs.

The connectedness of so many is my reward for showing-up year after year at the annual meetings of wonderful groups like the IPPS. But, now at age 60, I am looking for a new generation. When I joined the Eastern Region in 1983, there were names in propagation like Flemer, Cross, Fordham, Shugert, and Mezitt. They seemed so old and I, now, realize I am that old. I look around, now, and see young plants people — the next "odd" generation — and I like what I see. Kelly Norris goes plant hunting in South Dakota in 2011 and finds 13 different forms of *Monarda fistulosa*. Jared Barnes continues his ascent in the doctoral program at North Carolina State University. And Hillary Nichols who has worked at the Atlanta Botanical Gardens is now working at Tony Avent's Juniper Level Botanic Gardens. These young folks ask a lot of questions and I always remember: To Seek and to Share.

Portions of this paper were previously published on the Human Flower Project's blog.