

Vanessa Cook's reply to the Pulmonaria Questionnaire

I was a very early member of the NCCPG and on the committee at Wisley for many years so I thought I ought to have a National Collection. Pulmonarias had always been in my life, I thought they were excellent ground cover as my grandmother had them growing up her drive carpeting the ground under the trees, with no attention at all. I stupidly thought there were not many cultivars and therefore it would be an easy collection to have here! I took it very seriously, had a botanist from Leeds University to help me and we did all the correct work. Plants were labelled, all colour coded and herbarium specimens carefully stored; more difficult then, as computers were really in their infancy. Little did I know that I would end up with 150 in the garden, have spend hours researching origins in libraries, seeking old catalogues and even visiting Munich Botanic Garden, where much work had been done on pulmonarias. For this I was given a scientific award but no one really cared and many now seem to be just collections of plants. After fifteen years I realised that more and more plants were being named, especially in America. It was impossible to continue in the same way, so I still love them but now they are just treated as plants for the garden and nursery.

I was lucky to go to school in Gloucestershire and my mother, who was a keen gardener, took me to all the gardens in that area. The one that had the most influence was Margery Fish's garden at East Lambrook Manor and 'We Made a Garden' was one of the first books I bought. The cottage garden layout and the mix of so many foliage plants has stayed with me since. Of course pulmonarias were one of the plants she used liberally especially at the edge of the ditch, where there were primroses, hellebores, epimediums and ferns all loving the shady damp conditions.

Pulmonarias are so useful in many places, from *P. rubra* which with its large green leaves makes thick cover, and indecently flowers at Christmas here, to the narrow-leaved *P. longifolia* which I have seen growing on the steep hot hillsides in France, and will survive dry conditions. Sadly, garden articles tend to always mention the same varieties and rarely mention the smaller clump-forming *P. 'Little Star'* or *P. 'Blauer Hügel'* which are ideal for our typical small gardens. I particularly grow pulmonarias for the foliage and so favourites are *P. 'Diana Clare'*, *P. 'Trevi Fountain'* and *P. 'Cotton Cool'* all of which keep some foliage all winter. The universally praised *P. 'Blue Ensign'* does have good dark blue flowers but plain green foliage which disappears in late summer and walking round the garden in October I notice that *P. 'Blauers Meer'* still has good foliage as well as good blue flowers in spring so deserves its place in the garden. Not all varieties are easy to grow, the striking variegated *P. 'David Ward'*, named after the head gardener at Beth Chatto's garden, makes me envious when I see a large well-grown clump, but I find it needs very fertile dampish soil and protection from

wind and sun. I especially like *P. OPAL* with narrow leaves, well-spotted foliage and luminous pale blue flowers, it was named in Yorkshire so has a special spot in my mind for being local. Two new forms worth growing are *P. 'Miss Elly'* from the great Dutch gardener Coen Jansen and the appallingly named 'Shrimps on the Barbie' from, where else, America, has actually good foliage and rosy pink flowers.

I have named several forms, my favourite is *P. 'Stillingfleet Meg'*, named after my eldest daughter; a *longifolia* cross with narrow leaves and pink flowers. *P. 'Mary Mottram'* came to the collection with an incorrect name and was named after the owner of the nursery in Devon who had sent it, *P. 'Saint Anne's'* turned up when I was trying to find a *P. mollis* 'Oxford Blue' and this came from the Variegated Plant nursery in Nottinghamshire run by Joan Grout; it was not a *mollis* so I named it after the garden in which it had been found. Of course we had *P. 'Stillingfleet Gran'*, the pulmonaria in my grandmother's house that turned up not to be pure *P. officinalis*, but a hybrid. I also treasure plants given to me by their owners, *P. 'Blake's Silver'* when we visited June's beautiful garden near Dublin and *P. 'Rachel Vernie'* given to me by Jennifer Hewitt who was a good friend, constant help with my collection, and named after her daughter.

Vanessa Cook

Vanessa Cook has created the magnificent Stillingfleet Lodge Gardens and Nursery, which is available for individual and group visits:

Stillingfleet Lodge Gardens & Nurseries, Stewart Lane, Stillingfleet, York, YO19 6HP. <https://stillingfleetlodgenurseries.co.uk/>



Pulmonarias flowering away during the Group's AGM and visit to Stillingfleet Lodge Gardens in April 2025