

The Challenge of Establishing a Popular Gardening Culture in Iceland

ABSTRACT

Vilhjálmur Lúðvíksson, Chairman, The Icelandic Horticultural Society.

This is a short *personal* version of aspects of our garden history and assessment of the historical and natural conditions in Iceland that have shaped the physical and cultural situation of gardening traditions in Iceland. I shall briefly mention where I consider the frontiers of garden cultural development lies today and present a vision of the forces that shape its future.

It may be relevant when trying to evaluate its future course as a cultural phenomenon. I shall also reflect on the problems the historical context raises for the development of horticulture in this country and offer the view that the Icelandic Horticultural Society has of its future possibilities and needs.

Some challenges:

Problems:

1. Historical baggage and difficult/special natural conditions – catastrophic land use patterns. Cultural attitudes shaped by the past.
2. Short period of urbanized culture and modern garden evolution – only 125 years
3. Insufficient documented knowledge and understanding of the special and variable environmental conditions (soil and climate) that shape gardening success in Iceland.
4. Lack of public support to experimental work and plant trials
5. Limited formal experience with garden plants suitable for the Icelandic environment.
6. Limited market – weak local production of suitable plants - Does not sustain extensive production of plants or the cost of experimentation
7. Reliance on imports of variable quality in view of Icelandic environment

Opportunities:

8. To meet the now rapidly increasing interest in horticulture arising from changes in land-use, apparent climate change as well as changes in social values - including interest in healthy life styles, after the financial crash.
9. To benefit from international cooperation, especially with Nordic and other northern latitude and high altitude countries, in finding suitable plants for garden cultivation in Iceland.

So what has happened and what are we doing about these challenges?

The *values* of the Icelandic Horticultural Society driving its activities are:

- The joy of *creativity* – Gardening gives
- *Care for* plants, the environment and social communication about gardening
- *Perseverance* over 125 years of disseminating knowledge about garden cultivation and caring for plants despite adversities and setbacks

- *Curiosity* about plants, their genetic characteristics and appropriate methods to cultivate them under the constraints of the Icelandic environment.

I shall describe and show examples of some of the activities the IHS and its various pioneering members have engaged in recent decades, including plant hunting expeditions, some in connection with the forestry movement.

I think the main thesis of my lecture must be: **Considering the catastrophic history of land use in this country and the very short period for the development of modern gardening culture it is no wonder that we have a lot to learn and a long way ahead before we can really become a nation of gardeners! We must benefit from the experience of other nations.**

The final message is, however, that it is clear to those of us that remember Iceland at the middle of the 20th century that we can now grow horticultural plants that we would never have dreamed of could grow here fifty years ago!
