

# A QUEST FOR *PULSATILLA* 'BUDAPEST BLUE'

A search for the non-existent Holy Grail  
of the true (?) *Pulsatilla* 'Budapest'

---

by MIKE STONE

---

A LESSON I should have learned long since is that the further one delves into the taxonomy of many of our garden plants, the more complications one can uncover. This particular can of worms was opened at the 1994 Stirling Show, where Fred Hunt exhibited a truly magnificent *pulsatilla* under the name 'Buda Pest' (Fig.36, p.125). As is usual on such occasions, this superb plant triggered considerable discussion as to its name and antecedents. Back at home I turned to my reference books and started down what has turned out to be a long and confusing road. A couple of years ago Poll gave me the splendid Christmas present of a complete bound set of the *New Flora and Silva*. Founded by Peter Cox's father, E. H. M. Cox in 1928, twelve volumes were produced, until the onset of the Second World War rendered continuation impossible. Browsing through these old publications, one is struck by how little practical gardening has changed. We have machines rather than hired help, and plastics, but very few really original ideas. In Volume Twelve I found a short article on *Anemone pulsatilla*, 'Budapest var.' (sic) In this Mrs Dorothy Gorton describes how she saw the cut flowers on sale in Budapest in the spring of 1920, and subsequently discovered that they had come from the Svab Hegy (Swaben Berg), a hill west of the city. Later that year she was able to collect seed, and the issue includes a black-and-white photograph of the resulting plants in Mrs Gorton's own garden. These are also mentioned by Lady Beatrix Stanley in her Editorial, where she gives their colour as a pale mauve, *occasionally* pale blue. A plant exhibited in 1936 by Guy Fenwick gained an Award of Merit and was subsequently described as large-flowered, the broad tepals lavender suffused with mauve externally, rosy-lilac inside. A colour painting of this plant retained in the archives at Wisley is reproduced with their kind permission (Fig.38, p.126). It is clearly not the luminous soft lavender-blue so prized in current plants.

The strain survived the War, and continued to be grown all over

the British Isles, including a number of Irish gardens, from whence Fred's plant came, and the nurseries of Jack Drake and Joe Elliott. John Lawson's photograph of a plant at Inshriach (Fig.37, p.125) was taken in the late 1950s. I use the word "strain" quite deliberately, for Joe Elliott records that they had to keep it going by seed. A beautiful colour plate of one of his plants in bud is to be found in the AGS Bulletin 1986, vol.54, p.127. Our own plants (Fig.35, p.124) have two separate origins. Some are Irish, like Fred's, and some are from the Northumberland garden of John and Isa Hall who have grown it continuously for many, many years.

## THE TAXONOMY OF THE GENUS

The legend of *Pulsatilla* 'Budapest' really begins in April 1963 when an absolutely stunning clone was shown by Valerie Finnis and obtained an FCC under the name *Pulsatilla vulgaris* 'Buda Pest'. Later at Kew it was identified as *Pulsatilla halleri*; but, as Doris Saunders points out in the AGS Bulletin account (1963, vol.31, p.355), the FCC clone did not agree very well with this species as then understood. Miss Finnis' plant had particularly fine golden hairs, especially in bud, becoming sparse as the season advances, and noticeably rounded tepals. Although *P. halleri* is a highly variable species, with several regional sub-species, it generally has silvery hairs, less finely divided foliage with narrowly wedge-shaped lobes, and pointed tepals. The FCC plant had in fact been taken to Kew to be painted by Margaret Stones for the Botanical Magazine. The subsequent account by R. D. Meikle (Botanical Magazine n.5 (1964), 475) explains the association with *P. halleri*. It all hinges on the attribution of *Pulsatilla grandis*, Wenderoth. Meikle divides the complex into an Eastern group (*P. halleri*) whose coarsely dissected foliage is scarcely developed at first flowering, and a less hairy Western group (*P. vulgaris*) with more finely divided leaves which are well developed by flowering time. In doing so, he makes *P. grandis* a subspecies of *P. halleri*. This is the arrangement followed by Chris Brickell in the European Garden Flora, but I have to say that I am not entirely convinced. *Pulsatilla halleri* is more of a Southern species than Eastern. It occurs in a wide arc from the Carpathians (ssp. *slavica*), through the Balkans (ssp. *rhodopaea*), the Austrian province of Styria, which has its own local subspecies, to scattered locations in the Alps where ssp. *halleri* almost reaches the Rhone valley. There is even an outlying population in the Crimea, spp. *taurica*. *Pulsatilla vulgaris* has a more northerly distribution across much of Europe, including Scandinavia. It is not really 'alpine', in the true sense of the word, certainly far less so than the

scattered stations of *P. halleri* within the Alps themselves. When I consulted Fritz Kummert as to the status of *P. grandis*, he gave as his opinion that in no way was it part of *P. halleri*. The compelling reason given was that *P. vulgaris* ssp. *vulgaris* intergrades with *P. grandis* in Southern Germany and Upper Austria, thus forming a cline. Thus he would agree with J. R. Akeroyd who, when revising *Pulsatilla* for the second edition of *Flora Europaea*, retains it as *P. vulgaris* ssp. *grandis*. Therefore, it would appear that the *pulsatillas* around Budapest in being attributed to ssp. *grandis* are part of the low-altitude *P. vulgaris* complex, rather than the more montane *P. halleri*, which makes sense to me. It would be very interesting to know whether there is any ecological separation between *P. v.* ssp. *grandis* and *P. h.* ssp. *slavica* in the Carpathians, where their ranges overlap. Perhaps one of our Central European members can answer this question. Additionally, it would also be very interesting if someone could investigate the hills west of Budapest, one spring, and determine the colour variation in the wild plants.

## STILL MORE CONFUSION

Returning to the plants we have, almost certainly descended from Mrs Gorton's introduction, Fritz cautioned against using their foliage when attempting to key them out. He cited a hillside where *P. halleri* ssp. *slavica* showed every variation from a ranunculus-like leaf almost to the 'vulgaris' degree of dissection. One question, however does remain to be answered. If wild populations of *P. v.* ssp. *grandis* are often gold or tawny-haired, then why are both Fred's and our plants silver? In the garden most people have naturally tended to select the bluest forms and so have caused not only drift in colour in the sixty years since the original introduction, but may well have caused a trend towards paler hairs. Mrs Gorton apparently even had white-flowered seedlings; albinos often have paler foliage, so the possibility for variation did exist right from the start. The hypothesis is supported by a herbarium specimen at the RBG Edinburgh of a plant they received from Joe Elliott in the mid 1970s. This has *both* gold and silver hairs. If, as a result of this genetic drift the plants as currently grown are considered to be sufficiently distinct from the FCC clone, then the interesting possibility arises that one could be resubmitted for a further award. Over to you, Fred. Clearly we need a name for the whole strain, and Dr Lesley suggests the obvious but apt 'Budapest Blue'. Incidentally, Valerie Finnis had obtained her FCC clone from Munich Botanic Garden, so it is possible this is a quite separate introduction and not descended from Mrs Gorton's plants. Perhaps their records could

tell us? For my own part, I should be very interested to hear if anyone is growing plants of *P. vulgaris* ssp. *grandis* of known wild origin. If so, and they can spare material, then we should like very much to grow it alongside the old 'Budapest Blue' strain for comparison.

#### A FINAL SAD NOTE

One sad and cautionary sequel remains to be recorded. Valerie Finnis had grown her magnificent FCC plant in the open ground, and against her better judgement, was prevailed upon to lift it for show. "I was young and keen at the time," she said. The inevitable disturbance, followed by the time indoors at the show and while being painted at Kew, proved too traumatic, and it unfortunately died without ever being propagated. Clearly no purpose is now served by pursuing the non-existent Holy Grail of *the* true *Pulsatilla* 'Budapest'; just enjoy the plants we still have in the garden, and on the showbench, for what they are: supreme examples of that very beauty which drives our compulsion to cultivate. If it ever comes that the name on the label is more important than the beauty of the plant, then it is time to cease growing alpines, and take up stamp-collecting.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere thanks to Dr Alan Lesley of the RHS Wisley for help and permission to reproduce the painting of the AM plant; to the Library and Herbarium at RBG Edinburgh for their assistance in researching this article; to Valerie Finnis for being so patient and frank with a complete stranger; and finally to Dipl.-Ing. Fritz Kummert for bringing me out of the literature, and down to earth.