Chelsea Flower Show May 20 to 24,2024 as reported by John Alexander

It all started (as so many things do) with an email. It was November of 2023. Followed by several more emails exchanges and ultimately a long telephone conversation with John Parke Wright IV, (hereafter known as Parke). It was a conversation that would change my life. “Would I like to come to London and represent Canada as part of a panel staffing a display on orchid conservation at the Chelsea Flower Show in May of 2024?” The title of the display would be Orchids in the Wild – The Beauty of Nature. This would be the third year that Parke would be sponsoring the orchid conservation display as Chair of Orchid Conservation Chelsea. The 2024 display would showcase the orchids of Great Britain, India and North America, featuring both Canada and the United States. How could I say no?

Well there was one drawback. Going as a volunteer, I was responsible for all my own expenses. Both to get there, but also accommodation and meals. I was going to have one of those milestone birthdays in 2024, and the fact that this would be a once in a life time opportunity, I said yes.

Meetings ensued on plant availability, conservation notes for potential plants in the display, pollinators, press releases and handouts. Bea Patterson of SOOS helped design a bookmark that I could hand out highlighting SOOS on one side and the Canadian Orchid Congress on the other. Time flew by and before I knew it, I was on a flight to London with my husband Dr Peter Kaellgren.

Friday, before the show opened was a meet and greet the other colleagues held at Kew Gardens in the afternoon. Jean Hollebone of the Ottawa Orchid Society was the only other Canadian volunteer. Not everyone was in attendance as some would be arriving later in the week. I was delighted to reconnect with Julianne McGuinness and Melissa McCormick from NAOCC (North American Orchid Conservation Center at the Smithsonian in Washington D.C.) whom I knew from the *orchid-gami* © project. Both veterans of the 2023 show. As you can imagine, it takes a large crew to set up and staff a display for a week. The meeting was chaired by Lawrence Zettler of Illinois College and Parke. Before and after the meeting we were invited to explore Kew Gardens at our leisure as the real work of set up started on Saturday.

Saturday. It was amazing to see the display come to life. Moving plants, labels, signage, covering areas in moss and tying or anchoring everything in place. Imagine the displays at your orchid show, but on a grand scale. It worked like a well-oiled machine as many of us had worked on a variety of displays in the past. Ultimately the day came to a close and the final finessing would be completed on Sunday for the Monday morning judging.

Monday – press day. What a difference a day makes! I had Sunday off so I had last seen the display on Saturday, when it looked nice, but not finished. Monday morning it was outstanding! After the judging, the media were allowed in, followed by visits by the Royal Family in the afternoon. Only Parke was permitted to stay for the Royal Visits. Many in-depth interviews were scheduled for later in the week. I was fortunate to chat with Chanelle Georgina from the Express on press day.

https://www.express.co.uk/life-style/garden/1901551/royal-chelsea-flower-show-2024-lady-slipper-orchid-exclusive

Figure 1Chelsea Display

Figure 2 Canada/U.S.A. Detail

I was honoured to be asked to do five shifts at the display. The time went by incredibly quickly. I was amazed at how many people I talked to from Canada and the United States, even a few from the Toronto area. Tuesday was the RHS (Royal Horticultural Society) members day and it was busy! Mid way through the afternoon there was an announcement that the closest Tube Station, Sloan Square was being closed due to overcrowding. Not only Toronto has transit issues!

Figure 3 Yellow Lady's Slipper in display

There were two evening gatherings during the week after the show closed that were fundraising events for Kew Gardens. As there were many people there who could talk about North American Orchids, I was asked to talk to guests about the terrestrial orchids of Great Britain section of the display. One of the orchids in their section was the Yellow Lady's Slipper (*Cypripedium calceolous*) (Fig 3) that is native to Britain and many areas of Europe. In the 1930's, this species had been poached and lost enough habitat so that it was down to one (one!) plant in the wild. Since it was thought to have been extirpated from Britain, this single plant was monitored by 24 hour security to keep it from being poached as well. Over many years, Wild England, Kew Gardens and other organizations have propagated this plant so that it is represented in horticultural collections and potentially to be re-introduced to the wild. At the 2024 show, there were more displays about conservation than ever before.

Saturday was the last day of the show. What took several days to create was dismantled in a few hours. The orchids that were brought from the United States for the display were left to become part of the collections at Kew and Edinburgh. It was time to bid farewell to both old and new colleagues.

On my free day, Friday, I decided to visit one of my favourite places in London – the Barnes Wetland Centre. When I visited in the past, it was always to see birds, but this visit it was for both birds and orchids. I hoped that I would see local orchids in the re-wilded portion of the centre. And I wasn't disappointed! I was pleased to see a number of Marsh Leopard Orchids and Bee Orchids. My main interest is in North American orchids, but the terrestrial orchids of Europe are a close second.

Figure 4 Marsh Leopard Orchid at the Barnes

Figure 5 Bee Orchid

Figure 6 Grays Gorge

When Peter and I originally planned this trip, I had wanted to have a few days after the show to explore the countryside. While I was at Chelsea, Peter had been doing research and visiting friends outside of London. One of our most memorable experiences of the trip was on Monday, after the show had closed. I arranged with Zoe Ringwood of Essex Wildlife Trust to spend the day in the field with members of her team. We spent a soggy morning walking through meadows at Willow Park in Langdon (it wouldn't be England without rain!) They were peppered with orchids. Many were variations of Marsh Leopard Orchid and Green Orchid both members of the *Dactorallriza genus*. Bee orchids were seen as well. After a pub lunch we went to a re-wilding area in an old chalk quarry, Grays Gorge. The transformation of the area was incredible. Here were Man Orchids and European Twayblade as well as the Marsh Leopard Orchids. An area that had once been destroyed was coming back to life. Peter and I were amazed at the dedication and enthusiasm of the staff and volunteers we met at Essex Wildlife Trust. All were committed to what they were doing. Many of the projects are long term and won't be completed for many years to come.

Soon we were on our way back to Canada with pleasant memories of our time in England. My advice would be that if you get a call from Parke, the answer should be "Yes".