

My Way with Border Carnations

By George Shields (Deceased)

Background

I have been growing borders for about 40 years now and before that, I used to grow and show vegetables in and around Fence houses, where I live. I was first introduced to borders by a very good grower up here in the North East, Tom Peverley who I first met whilst working at Lambton D Pit. Tom had an allotment which housed 2 large greenhouses in which he grew all his border carnations. In fact many years ago now, the Garden News went to Tom's garden and they featured his methods in one of their editions.

In his prime, Tom grew around 800 pots, all 9" clays with one border to each pot. He was a very good grower and a good man to be around. In the early days I used to visit him quite often and eventually he talked me into growing a few myself and I have been growing them ever since. I can remember one of the first varieties he gave me was '*Something Special*' which I still have and grow to this day. Over the years some really good 'sports' have come from this variety, namely '*Harkle Special*', '*Vintage Special*' and '*Today's Special*'

Thankfully, I took to the borders and the first year or so I grew around 40 pots until I found my feet with them. Gradually the number increased until I was growing around 1500 plants, all under polythene covered wooden structures on two allotments. Enough background so now onto how I grow my plants.

Greenhouse and Plants

All my plants are grown under cover and presently I have a large 18' x 12' Greenhouse at my home so they are now nice and handy which is good as I am 79 years of age and not as mobile as I once was. I now have around 350 plants which I can manage alright and the pot sizes vary from 1.5 litre for 2 plants and 3 litre pots for 3 plants. I have over the last 2 years been experimenting with a single border in a 4" pot and to be fair the results have not been too bad.

In the greenhouse I have staging on either side which runs the entire length and is about 2 feet wide. I then have a centre run of staging which is 18" wide with a path walkway on either side of this centre bed. The staging is made of wood and is slatted to allow good air flow around the pots and it stands around 9" from the ground which gives a good working height to tend the plants, particularly during flowering time.

The side staging each takes 3 rows of pots whilst the centre staging holds 2 rows only. I therefore have eight rows the entire length of the greenhouse. The two side paths are covered by long lengths of old carpet which I keep nice and wet to keep the greenhouse nice and cool, particularly on hot days.

Compost

All my compost mix is the same from start to finish. I use good quality multi-purpose compost straight from the bag which I mix with grit at a ratio of 5 parts of compost to 3 parts grit. The mix 'crunches' when squeezed, and gives good drainage. To each bushel of mix (8 gallons) I add a 5" pot of Vitax Q4 and a 3" pot of calcified seaweed

which is high in calcium. No lime is added nor are any other fertiliser and I do not liquid feed. The feed is in the pot and this is all they get during the season. Just a point about the grit I use. Many years ago a friend had over 200 tons of unwanted grit from the roads tipped on his land and I am still using this which is somewhere between one eighth to one quarter inch grit and so is nice and sharp and ideal for the mixes. When I was growing 1500 plants, I did use some loam in the compost which helped the plants from drying out as fast which was important whilst I was still working as I had less time on my hands. Now I am well into retirement and with the plants being grown at home, I prefer them in soil less compost as watering is not a problem for me.

Cuttings

A few years ago I was growing around 2000 cuttings which I used to strike in July when the weather was really ideal for this purpose. I made up a propagating bench using an old door with 1.5 inch lats, nailed around the sides. This was filled with peat, watered and Jiffy 7's were then stood on top and then the cuttings were inserted. I have always found cuttings to be weaker during the early stages of growth as compared to layers which grow much stronger and yet, at flowering time, I still maintain it is nigh on impossible to tell which plants have been propagated by which method. Having said that, my preference is for layers and now all my propagation is done via this method. I have not grown cuttings now for about 8 years, one of the reasons being I now find July is too hot and not really conducive to growing good border cuttings

Layers

I no longer need a propagating bench as all my layers are taken in the pot of the mother plant. My first job is to remove about 1.5 inches of compost from the top of the pot which I replace with my mix. I usually begin the operation once the local shows have finished mid July and this will then continue to about the second week in September when I will have taken enough for my needs. I do not go mad but like to take my time and do perhaps 6 to 12 in one session.

I like to take about 4 layers per plant and pick those which look healthy and have grown good flowers. I now find it easy to manipulate the 'grass' and if the stem is a bit thick, I find a slight 'nick and squeeze' with a pair of pliers about 3" from the tip of the shoot makes the stem nice and pliable and easy to insert wherever desired.

The stem is cut with a knife and the layer is then held down into the compost via means of 'layering pins', which are home made and do the job very nicely. They are made of stainless steel wire by making a bend and then a tail which protrudes from the compost which makes it easy to spot when checking to see if they have rooted ok. Time to grow roots depends very much on the weather, this could be anywhere from 4 weeks through to 3 months.

After about 2 months, I begin to remove the pins and if the plant is well rooted, I then via a pair of scissors, cut it from the mother plant **but** leave it in place for another 4 weeks at which time it is potted up into a 3.5 inch pot.

It is usually the case that some pots will just not want to root layers and so with these I thin them out in March the following year taking them down from the 8 layers to 4 per pot and usually find they then begin to root and grow away ok.

Varieties

'*Harkle Special*' and '*Vintage Special*' grow well for me; in fact 3 years ago I had 'best bloom in show' with '*Vintage Special*' which is a purple coloured self. I grow around 20 pots of each variety.

Whilst I do not usually grow picotees, I do try to grow about 6 plants every year of '*Jane Coffey*' which is not one of my favourites but I do try to persevere with it. '*Robert Smith*' and '*John Wood*' along with about ten of my own sports, which I have been trying to improve. I also have the variety '*Jean Knight*' which I do like and this year have quite a few plants of it. '*White Champagne*' is the best white for me and this grows well under my conditions.

These days I grow more to support the shows rather than all out to win prizes. I am happy to see the benches full of borders and do my part to see this happen. This is now my main motivation for continuing to grow.

Calyx Supports

I do use calyx supports which are made from strips of 'velcro tape' cut into 2" strips long by ¼" wide. These are ideal for fastening around the buds and help to prevent splitting. I do find the variety '*Robert Smith*' does not split with me and so I never have to use them on this variety.

I mentioned earlier that I **do not** use liquid feeds and believe much bud splitting is down to too much feed at the wrong time. I leave well alone, allowing the plant to take food from the pot via good watering.

Spraying Plants

Whenever I do spray my plants, I always add Savona to the mix. I understand Savona is a safe, soft soap type of product and gives the leaves a lovely light green sheen which lasts for a few days. I have used Admire or Pravado over the last 2 years and in all honesty I have not really noticed any great difference. I do try to spray each month as a preventative but would do so immediately if I identified any problem.

Founder Member of the GNCS

I am proud to be one of the founding members of the Great North Carnation Society which was formed when seven friends used to gather in the home of Jack Wanless to talk about Carnations and Dianthus in general. At that time there was only the Rosecarpe Society for showing carnations in the North East and so we formed the Society to give local growers more opportunity to show their flowers. It grew from there and thankfully the Society has moved from strength to strength. During our first year the shows were held in my local Fencehouses Working Mens Club and were well supported.

Thoughts on the Wiring of Border Blooms

We decided in the North East that like Scotland, the wiring of border blooms would be allowed in our shows. In point of fact, it was the BNCS decision not to allow the wiring of border blooms in their shows which prompted the first meeting to form the GNCS. I know many members will not agree with me and they are entitled to their

own opinions, however I remain convinced borders should be wired for best effect. In truth this is one of the reasons why I have never been a member of the BNCS, however I would stress I have always supported the National Society albeit I do not agree with it's none wiring policy.

Thoughts on 'Sporting'

Many years ago, another excellent grower in the North East, Dennis Kellet, used to get lots of sports from his borders, and I once asked him for his secret. He told me to put some plants onto one side each year and pot them up into quite acidic compost with no fertilisers or lime whatsoever added. In fact he advised peat and old soil from the garden which had never been fertilised, mixed together. He said 'You will be surprised how many sports you will get' and he was right. Over the years I have enjoyed quite a few sports and I have found that certain varieties will throw more than others. Accordingly I tend to grow more of these via this method. Varieties such as, '*John Wood*,' has done very well for me along with '*Vintage Special*' and '*Harkle Special*'. A good tip I will share with you is to take the layers and peg them down as normal, do not be tempted to take cuttings from the stem as I find these far inferior than if grown via layers. It is my experience that once a plant 'sports', if I manage to take about 5 layers then I would expect at least 3 to grow on as the new sport.

Another good border grower in the North East, Jim Whittle has always dusted the cut in the layer, immediately before it is pegged down into the compost, with hormone rooting powder via use of a small artist paint brush. He swears by this method and has used it for many years to good effect

Final Comments

Having begun this report talking about Tom Peverley, I think it only right that I mention a grower in the North East who is perhaps one of the best border carnation growers around today and that is Stan Heslop, who grows and shows some wonderful flowers.

I hope you have found something of interest within these notes and I am always happy to help any member with growing issues, you just need to ask.

Best wishes to you all.