

ADRIAN SLACK (1933-2018)

“Nigel, it is obvious you share my passion and knowledge of the species. Long may you continue to do so.”

The day I received these words for inclusion in my book, was one of those you consider to be humbling. I never met Adrian in person, though he lived less than five miles away, but I do know his sister, Julia, and it was via her that, despite Adrian’s inability to communicate well, he managed to put this small passage together.

My first encounter with Adrian came about in the early eighties. The hobby then was in its infancy, certainly in the UK, and his first title, *Carnivorous Plants* (1979), became the first book in the English language to include not only an in-depth precis of the species and their varied trap mechanisms, but also touched on their wider cultivation. For me, and I believe many others, this was that pivotal moment when we realised, through the ground-breaking work of Adrian, that these plants could be cultivated by the hobbyist. Of course, back then there was no Internet, and we take that particular resource for granted. Nowadays, information, contacts, and knowledge, can be made and swapped instantly anywhere in the world, and with forty years of cultivation experience, that information is now vast. For me though, it all goes back to the one point when I opened that book for the first time to a world of wonder, one that set my eight-year-old mind alight with an obsession that has remained with me since.

Revolutionary in his desire to bring these plants to a wider audience, he was one of only a couple of contributors in the very first *Carnivorous Plant Society* journal in the autumn of 1978, describing his ‘Slack method’ of growing *Drosophyllum*, proving he was already yards ahead of other growers in the UK at the time.

1986 saw the publication of his second book, *Insect Eating Plants and How to Grow Them*. As the title suggests, this book was purely a growing guide, and brought together the wealth of experience Adrian had amassed over the previous two decades. By this time his nursery, Marston Exotics, based in Somerset, was the primary source for many growers, and it was one of life’s cruel twists that robbed Adrian not only of his business, but also his independence later that year when he suffered a major stroke, something he never recovered from. It was a sad way for his limelight to be taken away, but his enduring reputation as the father of the hobby, certainly in the UK, and I rather suspect further afield as well, served to keep him in the minds of many.

It was pure coincidence I washed up in Somerset, near to Adrian, having grown up in London, and I was honoured to have attended his funeral in the small village of Barton St David where he lived.



I can see Adrian's enduring legacy everywhere; in books and later publications where he is referenced, in Facebook groups and forums, and of course in the many cultivars he named which are still in cultivation today.

It was an honour to know Adrian, albeit in a roundabout fashion, and know he will be sorely missed by those for whom our hobby became richer as a result of his work.

—NIGEL HEWITT-COOPER • Hewitt-Cooper Carnivorous Plants • Somerset BA6 8NN • UK • sales@hccarnivorousplants.co.uk

Over the 30 years I have had the privilege of growing *Sarracenia* as a result of buying Marston Exotics from Adrian and continuing growing his amazing cultivars.

Although tissue culture is the norm these days, Adrian's dedication and hard work in the 1970's developing the business has paid off.

I have a 1977 mail order catalogue in which he lists 8 hybrids which were raised by him including *S. × mitchelliana* (*S. leucophylla* × *purpurea*), *S. × popei* (*S. flava* × *rubra*), and *S. × excellens* (*S. leucophylla* × *minor*).

By 1982, he had developed 14 hybrids, some of the new ones were: *S. × chelsonii* (*S. purpurea* × *rubra*), *S. "Comptonensis"* (*S. alata* × *willsii*), *S. × miniata* (*S. minor* × *alata*), *S. × mooreana* 'Marston Clone' (*S. leucophylla* × *flava* "Maxima", *S. × rehderi* (*S. rubra* × *minor*), *S. × 'Marston Mill'* (*S. × (leucophylla* × *× catesbaei*) × *flava*) and *S. × excellens* 'Loch Ness' (*S. leucophylla* × *minor*).

When I bought the business in 1987, he had by then raised over 40 hybrids which we still grow and sell today. All the stock has been regularly split and potted; some are in 6-liter pots (the more vigorous ones), mostly they are in 4-liter. I have the National Collection at our nursery. Over the years great strides have been made into more colour, interesting shapes in the hoods, etc. One thing about Adrian's hybrids, they are all vigorous and fairly hardy.

One of my favorite hybrids of his is *S. × popei*, it's a neat plant, great flowers buff/orange and very bushy – a photo is on our web site gallery (www.pj-plants.co.uk).

Adrian Slack will live on in his books and plants all over the world.

He is the FATHER of Carnivorous Plants in the Western World.

—PAUL GARDNER • P and J plants (formerly Marston Exotics) • pj_gardner@btopenworld.com

Without doubt, Adrian Slack has been one of the best known names associated with carnivorous plant celebrities, known for his books, appearances (flower shows, lectures, and TV). However, for those of us living in Britain, there were multiple opportunities to meet the man himself, a legend in his own lifetime. I count myself fortunate to be one of those who not only met him but chatted with him on various occasions, especially at the Chelsea Flower Show in London, where Adrian would take breaks from his Marston Exotics stand.

Those chats and, especially, observations when Adrian was talking with others would easily reveal a jovial man, a slightly portly figure prone to smiling and laughing (Santa Claus comes to mind). Where ladies were concerned, he would readily attempt to use CPs to shock, verbally painting unnecessarily gruesome images with tales of how insects meet their doom. And when Adrian had other free time, his penchant for red wine would be transparent. Superficially, one could be forgiven for thinking Adrian to be not too serious, slightly eccentric and a flirt but that would have been a shallow view of the man.

Of his wine, he was by choice, particular in what he drank. Anybody can slosh back a bottle of plonk but Adrian had more refined tastes. He also participated in English Civil War re-enactments. This may look boyish from afar but to the participant, seriousness drove the level of research that allows an accurate depiction of the period's clothes, guns and battles. Similarly, he may, occasionally, have been limited in what he thought plants could tolerate but, generally, he wrote a meticulous description of what he had very carefully experienced. Even his attire was fastidiously considered, a yesteryear's gentleman who stood out in any crowd.

Underneath the flamboyant showman, the real Adrian was a man who dedicatedly immersed himself in the things he adored. He had an eye (and mind) for detail and a lust to study, enjoy and share his passions, all with gentle (though occasionally dark) humour and the enthusiasm that can only come from someone driven by his passions.

—PAUL TEMPLE • paulindr@gmail.com

It is difficult to think of someone who had a greater influence on promoting public awareness across the world of carnivorous plants and how to grow them than Adrian.

What follows relies heavily on a monograph produced by Denise Goodman of the Barton History Club who kindly gave permission for extracts to be included in this memorial.

His family moved to Barton St David in Somerset when he was 14 and he remained in the area until his death in May this year. He was educated at Edgarley Hall in Glastonbury and at Millfield School in Street before studying art in London and becoming a garden designer. In the 1950s his developing interest in carnivorous plants supplanted garden design.

He spent 3 years in Cumberland in the 1960s where he had access to the Bishop of Penrith's walled garden which had many Victorian glasshouses. It was here that his early *Sarracenia* hybridisation trials began and tests of their hardiness in the UK were made. He subsequently produced many *Sarracenia* hybrids including, 'Lynda Butt', 'Daniel Rudd', and 'Lochness'. He also produced many *Pinguicula* hybrids including 'George Sargent', 'Weser', 'Sethos', and 'Tina'. Most of us will have Adrian's hybrids and cultivars in our collections.

Subsequently he moved to Frome where at an old mill and garden he started Marston Exotics together with Tim Heneage, a master at Millfield School. This became a very successful business selling plants by mail order and latterly to garden centres. He amassed the largest collection of carnivorous plants in Europe.

He exhibited regularly at the Chelsea Flower Show and was awarded the RHS Lindley Silver Medal in 1981, followed by 5 gold medals.

Adrian was a well-known broadcaster on both radio and television and was featured in many newspaper articles. In 1979, he published his book "Carnivorous Plants" which became the seminal work on growing carnivorous plants. His later book "Insectivorous Plants and How to Grow Them" was published in 1986. It was these books that inspired many people around the world to develop an interest in carnivorous plants and start their own collections. Many a discussion on cultivation techniques included the words "Slack says ...".

He was instrumental in the formation of the Carnivorous Plant Society in the UK in the late 1970s and was a founder member. He supported the society throughout its early years by writing articles for the journal and providing plants for our stands at the Chelsea Flower Show. In later years, societies were formed in many European countries and elsewhere across the world.

In 1986, he suffered a catastrophic stroke which forced his retirement. Marston Exotics was taken over by Paul Gardner and moved to Herefordshire.

In 2000, the International Carnivorous Plant Society awarded him lifetime honorary membership and the December 2000 edition of their Newsletter was dedicated to him.

Adrian was a larger than life plant enthusiast with many other interests ranging from his great enthusiasm for French wines and tomato sauce (not together), art, 16th century English history, and violin playing.

Members may wish to read some “Favourite Anecdotes on Adrian Slack” by such luminaries of the CP community as Rob Cantley, Martin Cheek, Paul Gardner, Phil Mann, Barry Meyers-Rice, and Paul Temple which can be found at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adrian_Slack.

One anecdote recalled by his cousin Count Nikolai Tolstoy at Adrian’s very well attended memorial service was as follows:

Adrian and Nikolai planned to attend a Burn’s night event at his favourite pub. While Nikolai had a kilt to wear, Adrian did not and decided to wear his Sealed Knot uniform. In the early hours Adrian unwisely decided that it would be OK to drive back to his house through the leafy lanes of Somerset and inevitably crashed into a ditch miles from anywhere. This being before the advent of mobile phones, they were unable to call for help. Seeing a distant light they walked across several fields to reach a farm house. They knocked and the door was opened by the farmer’s wife who was startled to be confronted by two men, one dressed as a Cavalier Officer and the other as a Scot both of whom were heavily under the weather.

RIP Adrian.

—DENNIS BALSDON • The Carnivorous Plant Society • UK • dennisbalsdon@blueyonder.co.uk

Carnivorous Plant Nursery

*Promoting environmental stewardship through
engaging educational materials and low-cost, high-quality carnivorous plants.*



- Carnivorous Plants
- Bog Orchids, Bog Plants
- Live Wingless Fruitflies
- Activity Book for Carnivorous Plants
- Bugs in the Bog Board Game
- Free Monthly Drawing
- Online Shopping and Mail Order

www.carnivorousplantnursery.com

301-824-0133 | info@carnivorousplantnursery.com | 13763 John Cline Road, Smithsburg, MD 21783