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Aeschynanthus burttii

A Special Visit with Bill Burt

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As Chair of AGGS Awards of Appreciation, I was excited to personally visit the Royal Botanical Garden Edinburgh and officially present the 2003 award certificate to Bill Burt who started the garden's gesneriad research. The award to Bill Burt was presented in his absence at the 2003 Convention by Michael Riley. Since I had a trip planned to the United Kingdom with my sister in August, it was a perfect opportunity to meet Bill Burt and visit the RBGE. Arrangements were made with the help of Mary Mendum, but unfortunately she was not there on the day of my visit.

Hannah Atkins met me first, and then Bill Burt and Steve Scott joined us for a wonderful tour of both the warm and cool gesneriad research greenhouses. Today the RBGE is a world-rekknowned hub of research in gesneriads of the Old World, in particular the genera *Aeschynanthus*, *Streptocarpus*, *Cyrtandra*, *Didymocarpus*, *Saintpaulia* and *Agalmyla*. Bill Burt collected and wrote about *Streptocarpus* for over fifty years. He is officially retired now but comes to the gardens every day and is still involved with gesneriads and *Streptocarpus* identification. During our greenhouse tour, he showed me the plants that he knew and loved.

At RBGE, Mary Mendum works with *Aeschynanthus*, and Hannah Atkins studies *Cyrtandra*. As Horticulturist of Research Collections, Steve Scott is in charge of gesneriad growing and knows all the plants. I could not believe that he waters the plants by hand with a green watering can with room-warmed water, drawn into a large basin the night before, as they have no electricity for pumps or water heaters. The greenhouses were full of mostly Old World gesneriads. Many unifoliolate *Streptocarpus* were unfortunately past blooming but had tagged seed pods. Also growing were tall stemmed *Streptocarpus* species such as *S. papangae*, and a variety of *Aeschynanthus* species I had never seen or heard of before.



Hannah Atkins, Steve Scott, and Bill Burt in one of the gesneriad research greenhouses at RBGE



Bill Burt receiving his AGGS award from Molly Schneider



The delicately spotted flower of *Aeschynanthus burttii*

After visiting the gesneriads in the Research Collections, Bill directed us to the "Glasshouse Experience" (as the public greenhouses are called) specifically to see the world's largest rhododendron collection. Many gesneriads grow in these display houses as well.

The three of us then met in the lobby of the science building's botanic garden offices where I presented the AGGS Award of Appreciation to Bill Burt. The week after my visit, the gardens had a celebration marking Bill's 90th birthday. A Festschrift celebration in an upcoming issue of the "Edinburgh Journal of Botany" will honor his life's work.

Continuing my own tour of the garden, I walked around all the greenhouses, including their 1858 palm house, the rock and heath gardens, the alpine house (with a few more gesneriads) and the herbaceous border and winter garden. I concluded a splendid visit with a lunch and gesneriad conversation with Hannah in the terrace café overlooking the arboretum.

Note: For more information on Bill Burt and gesneriads at Edinburgh, see THE GLOXINIAN, Vol. 53, No. 1. In addition, the 2003 summer issue of "The Botanics", magazine of the National Botanic Gardens of Scotland, featured "Gesneriad Gems – On your Windowsill, Around the World" with a flower close-up of *Aeschynanthus guttatus* on the cover.

Aeschynanthus burttii

This new species is a trailing, epiphytic forest dweller collected by Mary Mendum in Sulawesi. It was named after Bill Burt, the man who started RBGE's gesneriad research, to mark his 90th birthday last August. The recently published *Edinburgh Journal of Botany Festschrift* contains a full description of *A. burttii* and other new gesneriad species in addition to many papers and articles on subjects in which Bill has a particular interest. To order a copy (estimated £35 including postage and handling) contact the RBGE Publications Department at <pps@rbge.org.uk>.