

Gardener's World Autumn Fair

My daughter very kindly helped me at Audley End House on the Essex/Cambridgeshire border on the weekend of August 30th to September 1st.

We set up on the day before the fair opened to the public, and had been given a 3 m × 3 m gazebo, with three trestle tables free of charge by the organisers.



Hebe Society display at Gardener's World Autumn Fair

One table was used for display plants, the second table for books, information boards and leaflets, the third table for sales plants.

The first day of the show (Friday) saw a large crowd of people queuing at the entrance eagerly waiting to get a bargain. These are always the serious plant buyers. There were plenty of traders selling the usual paraphernalia, and we were kept busy with questions about pruning, and which plants would survive on heavy clay,

a common theme for the weekend. We did manage to sell a few plants, one book and gain a new member.

The second day (Saturday) saw a totally different crowd, and many stayed away as there was heavy rain elsewhere in the county. It was also several degrees colder than the previous day and when the wind picked up, I had to weigh down the back of the gazebo with a Danish trolley of ornamental grasses, stored behind us by another trader.

I lost count of how many times I pinched shoots off the spare plants under the table and gave demonstrations on how to take cuttings. I also lost count of how many people lost their hebes two winters ago.

Day three saw a drop of rain to damp down the dust at daybreak, and by the time we got to the show the ground was completely dry again. It was also colder in the morning than the previous two days, but by mid-afternoon the temperature had risen twelve degrees to a balmy 28 degrees C. People came into the gazebo to get out of the sun, and not one of them left without buying a plant. I stood in their way!

One slight mishap was an elderly lady on a mobility scooter trying to drive into the gazebo to look at the plants. She squeezed the throttle too hard, and careered into one of the tables, lifting it off the ground and tipping all of the plants off. No damage other than to her pride, and she did buy a couple of plants.

Most people buying plants weren't interested in the variety names, and just wanted a plant a certain size or colour. By far the most popular plant was *Hebe* 'Maori Gem', which I placed at the head of the table to catch people's eyes as they walked past.

Leptinella 'Platts Black' was popular too, and many people have either rockeries or gravel gardens. Taller growing hebes aren't usually as popular as the smaller variegated types, but drew a lot of interest. I even helped a garden designer with suggestions for her

London project in a courtyard garden. I then designed the garden for her!

We had about 80 different varieties of hebes on the tables, and people were amazed at the number of different forms and leaves shape/size. They also liked the small cuttings of *Podocarpus* 'Country Park Flame'. See page 27.

The whole weekend went well and the organisers have invited us back next year, and also to the spring fair in the New Forest in May. They also asked me to exhibit at Gardener's World Live next June at Birmingham NEC. This may not be possible as we would need a serious amount of support from volunteers, as it would be on a scale with Hampton Court. We would also need plants for display and plants for sale, something I cannot do by myself.

Steve Harding