

GARDEN NEWS

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Inner Temple Coleus collection

WHO'D HAVE THOUGHT I'D BECOME A BEGONIA GEEK...

In the last two weeks of August, it suddenly felt that autumn was just around the corner. Hunter, the Inner Temple cat, kept bringing us his trophies on a daily basis, sometimes twice a day, and he settled in the potting shed for his daytime snoozes – I guess his hidey-holes in the flower borders were getting too wet and cold for a satisfactory slumber. The winds also increased in frequency and velocity taking their toll on the High Border and threatened to pull down the display along Paper Buildings, but emergency staking of the 1500 Zinnias managed to prevent the total and premature collapse of this show.

With everything in the garden ticking over and even the weeds slowing down, there has been time for reflection, planning and plant orders. I am really pleased with our pot displays on the steps of Kings Bench Walk and around the pond this year. The gate from Kings Bench Walk is an important access point to the Garden; plants greet passing members on their way to chambers in the morning and say

‘Good Night’ on the way home. I have to admit at the height of the season it was impossible to pass any other member on the steps, as the flowers and their pots just multiplied and spread, though I like to think that perhaps the fabulous sight would have anyway slowed everyone’s passage. We managed to highlight every season with a particular plant, starting off with crocus and daffodils in early spring, followed by a variety of tulips which in early summer gave way to sweet peas and morning glories, then headily scented lilies for the summer, and now there is a full palette of colour in the variegated leaves of many kinds of Coleus. This will surprise anyone who knew me when I was doing my training at Longwood Gardens in the USA, where I came to regard them with deep loathing. I bred them to maintain populations of mealy bug, a nasty little greenhouse pest, to test the effects of various pesticides and I spent too many long, hot summer days in the hothouses using a magnifying glass to count the individual little beasts on the plants.

However in the 19th century *Coleus* was a popular parlour plant and as has been used *en masse* in London parks and gardens as a summer annual, perhaps mealy bugs weren't such a problem with the Great Smog keeping them at bay. And now there is a 21st century comeback, with over 1400 cultivars available, although here we only grow a small selection including 'Kong Rose', 'Wizard Scarlet', 'Saturn' and 'Chocolate Mint'.

The pond has become a popular space at lunchtime, people munching their sandwiches under the shady canopy of the plane trees. Here we have been running trials of various leaf and tuberous begonias, which again were popular in Victorian times with their variegated and different shaped leaves. I never thought I would grow fond of them any more than I would of *Coleus*, but in fact I've become a bit of a geek over our collection, once making a 100 mile round trip in my spare time to collect special cuttings from RHS Garden Wisley. It was worth it, though, as we now have a really good selection to show off around the pond. Sadly there is not space in the greenhouse to over-winter them all, so we will choose the 'fittest' in the sense of having the most attractive appearance rather than opting for those with strong enough survival instincts to make it through the frosts. This season it has been great fun to see our aquatic and marginal plants like the gunneras, irises, papyrus sedge and *Thalia delbata* doing so well. The latter is carnivorous, catching passing insects in its purple flowers to ensure a varied diet. Only the papyrus will be lifted into the warmth of the greenhouse for the winter, the others have to make it through with just some straw covering their crowns.

Oh heavens, I can already feel the anxiety about the coming winter, dreading that the snow and frost will come again, and worrying that we will have more unfortunate casualties. I could wish for a mild one of the type we have become so used to, or I could be more practical while doing the plant orders and place another one with the straw and fleece supplier...