

OBITUARIES

MARTIN JOHN BARBER (1954–2019)

Martin Barber, who died in November 2019, for many years championed the study of plant aberrations in Britain. Martin was interested in many aspects of natural history but most especially in plant teratology, the study of those weird and wonderful plant oddities which often turn up but are usually hard to explain. He was one of the few people actively dealing with such things. He paid frequent visits to the Royal Horticultural Society at Wisley with plant oddities, donating interesting specimens to their herbarium and discussing with the horticulturists new cultivars which he raised from those teratological specimens which were stable and bred true and that he registered for sale. From November 1993 he published the little journal *That Plant's Odd*, with three issues annually, full of oddities and interesting observations, from his own discoveries as well as those from many contributors amongst the 70 or so subscribers that the journal enjoyed. Though initially issued in A4 format, it became an A5 publication from No. 10 in 1997, with colour introduced from No. 24 in 2001. It ceased publication in June 2017 (No. 61).

As well as the journal, Martin wrote and published a range of informative booklets on various aspects of the subject, including original commentary on early works such as Thomas Hopkirk's *Flora Anomala* published in 1817, analysis of Gerard's native plant aberrations as well as an introduction to the subject of plant teratology, an appreciation of lawn weeds and others. Martin also established, in 1992, a *Register of Stable Aberrant Forms of Native Plants*. This was outlined in *BSBI News* in 1992 and was intended to update the early lists of Maxwell Masters and maintain them over time. In 1999 he initiated a project on aberrant plantains, having been impressed with apparently long-stable aberrations in this genus, some of which were documented in the 16th century by John Gerard. He recognised the genus *Plantago* as the richest source for native plant teratology, the basis for a 'teratological millennium



Martin Cragg-Barber at the British Plant Gall Society AGM, Bewdley, Worcestershire, September 2015. Alan Rix

project' which would serve as a suitable tribute to it! The following year, special recording sheets were issued, announced in *BSBI News*, and the project was also outlined in the pages of *Cecidology*, the journal of the British Plant Gall Society. Another project, entitled *Floraurea* and also initiated in 1999, involved the collection and documentation of yellow forms of plants. Martin was a frequent contributor to the Annual Exhibition of the BSBI, providing annual updates and discoveries which, in 1999, included various pigment aberrations that prompted the *Floraurea* project. He also mused on the possible effects of global warming which he saw as prompting out-of-season flowering and leafing and, in an article in *BSBI News* in 2003, wondered what new forms might occur as a result. Martin was also a long-term member of the British Plant

Gall Society, appreciating that some plant oddities may be induced by other organisms and that some teratological developments in plants are akin to galls. He attended the Society's AGMs at times, most recently that at Ashford, Kent, in 2017.

Martin was born on 27 May 1954 in Windsor, and attended King's College School, Wimbledon. He had a particular interest in botany and it was at a botany evening class at Southwark College in 1985 that he met his future wife, Jane Cragg, and changed his name then to Cragg-Barber. They were married in 1986 at Beaumaris, Anglesey and had two sons, Edmund and Kester. Until then Martin lived at Hersham in Surrey where he developed his interest in plant teratology and was a member of the local Natural History Society, thereafter moving to Hullavington in Wiltshire. He was by profession a gardener, working in various private gardens in the Chippenham area, such as Fosse Farm Barns, where he worked for 28 years from 1986, transforming and greatly enhancing the site. Martin had an amazingly keen eye for plant aberrations, such things that most would overlook completely, finding them almost wherever he looked. Many of these aberrant plants, including a surprising number found at Chedglow Manor Farm near Malmesbury in Wiltshire, where he was employed for 30 years, he successfully grew and marketed as new cultivars. Chedglow aberrations often featured in the journal or were shown as annual exhibits as, for example, *Chelidonium majus* 'Chedglow', a variegated form that flowers but does not set seed, which was highlighted at the 2003 Annual Exhibition. The Chedglow aberrations were the subject of a whole booklet published in 2004.

Martin had a great sympathy for the environment and conservation, clearly demonstrated by his love of gardening and the great outdoors. One notable local conservation success concerns the red-listed Barberry Carpet moth (*Pareulype berberata*), a species confined now to a few populations in Wiltshire and Dorset, whose larvae feed on wild Barberry (*Berberis vulgaris*). The moth is a Priority Species in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. In 2017, Martin identified Barberry at Hullavington, the stimulus for a search

of the site and discovery of a population of the moth at what was an important new locality.

Martin's interests extended well beyond botany and teratology. He was much interested in music, especially the more esoteric aspects, often attending concerts and festivals. He was fascinated by traditional and primitive instruments, perhaps most notably the didgeridoo. He was for many years a member of a didgeridoo club in Bristol and often attended didgeridoo festivals. There was much else that attracted his attention, for example attending conferences of the Society of Existential Analysis and practicing yoga. He also attained a Diploma in psychotherapeutic counselling. Martin died on 17 November 2019, aged 65. His tragic early passing leaves a big gap in the world of teratology and his unique approach to life will be missed by all who knew him. He was a great character, eccentric undoubtedly, and one of a kind, always with a different and thought-provoking perspective on things. He was a kind and thoughtful person, always willing to explain to others weird plant developments and his fascination for them. He touched and influenced the lives of very many people, family, friends, colleagues, other acquaintances, and indeed all who knew him, attested to by the many tributes that have been received. All will hold lasting memories of a unique character, a gentle person, always helpful and interesting, and he will be much missed by all of them. Sincere condolences are extended to all the family.

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