

September : The Leek

The Giant Leek Championships of North Eastern England

A Passion For Leeks

'I don't think leek growing can recover from this. It is a really sad affair ...' (1)

'It's a disaster ... the carpet has been pulled from under us ...' (2)

'It's an absolute bombshell. People used to come from all over the country and the whole leek world is shattered.' (3)

Three comments made following the announcement in 2008 that the World Open Leek Championship, which had been held in Ashington, Northumberland, for the previous 28 years, was to be permanently scrapped.

The responses above give some idea of the deep cultural importance of leek-growing and showing and of the passion, dedication and deep feelings inspired by this not-so-humble vegetable in the leek-exhibiting heartland (chiefly Northumberland & Durham) of England's North-East.

The good news is that competition leek-growing in 2014, is still very much alive.

John Soulsby, who has been growing leeks for some 45 years, and who is, in his own words 'still as keen as when I first started' has just set up what he describes as 'the biggest leek show in the country ... The N.P.L. Society's annual show held in tandem with the North East Horticultural Show'. N.P.L.S. stands for National Pot Leek Society - an organisation dedicated to the art and science of leek growing.

The aim of growing leeks for show is to produce stands of individual vegetables, which together combine size, uniformity and quality. There are three classes of competition leeks: 'intermediate', 'blanch' (both of which are judged on length and overall quality) and 'pot'.

A 'pot leek' is a phenomenal thing to behold, a vegetable bodybuilder with a perfect physique: no blemishes on the white part (the 'barrel'), no mud on the roots (the 'beard'), and no holes, tears or discolouration of the green part of the leek (the 'flags'). Exhibited in pairs, a stand of two of these leeks, should occupy a volume of 250 cubic inches, and measure 16 inches around, but only up to 6 inches in length up to the button – where the flags meet around the barrel of the plant. Any blemish or imperfection will affect the final result, with points being awarded for quality.

Leek shows are traditionally held in September, after some 12 months' of diligent husbandry, and the application of nutrients (which might include dried blood, manure or brown ale) (4) to boost growth.

**ANNA LEWINGTON
IN PRAISE OF PLANTS ©**

On the morning of the competition the leeks are lovingly lifted from their beds, then washed and polished, and their roots combed, before careful transportation to the show.

This year's Pot Leek champion at the National Pot Leek Society's annual show was Michael Ridley who showed leeks of superb quality measuring 247 cubic inches.

Of course these giant leeks are not produced to be eaten – rather for the love it all, the enormous pride felt by the grower, and indeed the considerable amounts of prize money that could be won. At the now defunct World Leek Championships £1,300 was on offer for the best stand of leeks and £1,000 for the heaviest onion. At this year's show, Michael Ridley received £500 for his pot leeks.

And just like a champion race horse, a prize leek is valued for its seeds, which develop slowly in the bulbous pods that form above the flags in the Spring and which can be sold-on to keen buyers.

A Long tradition

The tradition of growing leeks to competition standard goes back over 150 years and is said to have its origins in the region's mining culture.

After an arduous day, toiling underground in the dark and grime of the pits, the miners found understandable solace and relief in their vegetable gardens or allotments, providing both contact with the living world and produce to take home and eat.

Leek clubs were formed at around this time and were usually attached to a social club or pub. Some were run for fun, but others, especially in the former coal fields of Durham and south-east Northumberland, were taken very seriously indeed. It could take years to gain acceptance to a club - prestigious leeks clubs were to be joined by invitation only.

The first recorded leek show in the North East was, according to local grower and leek historian Bill Rutherford, in Swarland, Northumberland in 1846. In their hey-day such shows were common. During the 1930s, in Ashington alone, there were around 35 shows. Some, staged in Victorian Mechanic's Institutes or Masonic Halls, were grand events spread over two days. Others, with more modest aims, might be single day affairs, held on a Sunday, in out-buildings at the back of pubs. However, as John Soulsby has confirmed, from around 2000 - 2006 a steady decline ensued

One club that managed to keep going was the Northern Club – with 2,000 members - at Ashington. Set up by Bill Rutherford it staged the first 'World Open Leek Championship' in the 1980s. The show continually set new standards in the size and weight of leeks exhibited – those of 2008 being over double the size of those displayed 20 years previously. (5)

With the smaller shows put on by clubs and pubs beginning to fall by the wayside, the World Open Leek Championship helped to keep the tradition of leek growing alive. It became the foremost show, attracting entries from across the UK. The scrapping of this show and also the 'World Heaviest Onion' challenge, then dealt competition-leek growing a serious blow.

The organisers reported that it was just not viable any longer and that the outlay couldn't be justified, because although the level of entries remained high too few people were now coming to view the show. Former Secretary of the show and of the Northern Club, Dick Atkinson, blamed the rising cost of living, which was he said, affecting drinking, and therefore affecting pubs and clubs alike. He explained: 'We were not getting enough back on beer sales to recoup our money'. (6)

It was felt that the demise was also due to the fact that young people were no longer interested, as fewer and fewer young people were taking up the hobby. Another contributory factor was the cost of raising the giant leeks to competition standard - the buying and maintenance of polytunnels, for example, or the heating greenhouses.

It is against this background then and striving to reverse the decline in the North East's traditional leek shows that John Soulsby has set up the new combined show. Although numbers are down from those reached by the Society at its peak (about 1200) the membership base has broadened and today's 700 Pot Leek Society members come from all over the country. Having made information much more freely available about their cultivation through detailed videos and teaching, and by selling and sending leek seeds far and wide across the British Isles and Europe, John has demystified and helped popularise the successful cultivation of leeks.

So is rivalry still fierce? Are those tales of fanatical growers sitting up all night, with a shot gun to guard their leeks and of 'nobblers' attacking prize vegetables and firing air gun pellets through a competitor's lovingly tended flags (7) really true? They might just be!

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Notes:

1, & 3, 5, Bill Rutherford, 2, Tony Cuthbert, 6, Dick Atkinson, quoted in 'Decline in visitors fells top leek show' in 'The Journal' www.thejournal.co.uk/news/north-east-news/ 2008.

4, 7. 'Country & Garden: It's showtime ... in the land of the rising leek'. *The Independent*. September 11, 1999.

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