

Spectacular patula



Botanist **Danielle Satterthwaite** is on the trail of a rare Welsh beauty. Critically endangered, *Campanula patula* is an elusive quarry. Here, Danielle recounts her summer's search for it

Over the summer, the Conservation and Research Department of the National Botanic Garden of Wales were set a challenge by Andy Jones from the Countryside Council for Wales: to assess the current status in Wales of the critically endangered *Campanula patula* (spreading bellflower) and also to look at one site in particular, where it was growing close to a proposed Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

A challenge this plant species certainly is: it can be seen in one place one year



Main photo: Botanist Danielle Satterthwaite, top, with Dr Natasha de Vere, Head of Conservation and Research. Above: *Campanula patula* (spreading bellflower)

and then disappear for decades before popping back up!

So, for about two weeks in all, Dr Natasha de Vere, Bruce Langridge and I from the Garden, along with members of Plantlife, Countryside Council for Wales and the Botanical Society of British Isles went out on the hunt for *Campanula patula*.

After obtaining a list of all the known

previous sites for this beautiful flower, the investigation began.

Natasha and others had some success while looking just across the border in England and found that some of the previous sites still had a *Campanula patula* presence.

Sadly, though, back in Wales there was little hopeful news as only three out of 18 sites visited were found to have

Campanula patula in flower.

A week into the search, I was able to join Natasha and the hunt continued. While seeing a lot of the beautiful Welsh countryside and much apparently suitable habitat for *Campanula patula*, we still had little joy in Wales.

Then our luck changed. While looking at the proposed SSSI site in Montgomeryshire – where *Campanula patula* was known to be flowering – with Alastair Hotchkiss, from Countryside Council for Wales, a new site about halfway between the proposed SSSI and the known population was found.

This seemed like the find of the year to the three of us. Happy with our discovery, we continued on our way to the proposed SSSI to see if we could find any more potential sites. While walking through a field containing a tall grassland habitat, Natasha was telling Alastair that in Central Europe this was the sort of habitat that *Campanula patula* is most often reported to be growing in, when Alastair suddenly stopped and pointed, asking if that plant a few yards away wasn't another *Campanula patula*.

Being wary of getting overly excited at such a find, we carefully identified the newly discovered plant, and even compared it with the nearby harebells, which are a common relative of *Campanula patula*, until we were certain:

Being wary of getting overly excited at such a find, we carefully identified the newly discovered plant, and even compared it with the nearby harebells, which are a common relative of Campanula patula, until we were certain: yes, this was another Campanula patula plant

yes, this was another *Campanula patula* plant.

Then, later on, when looking at maps that we had been working on along the way, we realised that between all three sites there was definitely potential habitat for this wonderful species. A very successful day of botanising.

This is a beautiful bellflower, as shown in the photographs taken while out this summer. In England and Wales it is on the edge of its range, as it also grows through Central Europe. In England it is endangered and it is critically endangered in Wales.

Here it tends to favour woodland edges and disturbed roadside banks. It flowers late, between July and September/October. Flowering so late means there are few other species that compete with its beauty in early autumn.

In some parts of Europe, it can be a fairly common species seen in hay meadows, whereas it is also known to be endangered in other countries such as Luxembourg. Sadly, despite *Campanula*

patula being so endangered here, little is known about its ecology. This lack of information prevents anybody from being able to do much to conserve it.

This is where the National Botanic Garden comes in. *Campanula patula* is a species that the Garden is working on as part of its Rare Welsh Plants Project in conjunction with National Museum Wales, Countryside Council for Wales, the Botanical Society of the British Isles and Plantlife, with the ultimate aim of conserving *Campanula patula* in Wales.

Currently, we are writing reports to send to Countryside Council for Wales on the findings of the summer's fieldwork. We have also obtained seed from the Millennium Seed Bank and Ann Maloney from the Garden's horticulture team is working on germinating this species so that we can find out more about its biology.

Next summer, our fieldwork will continue and we will try and find out more details about the habitat requirements of this elusive plant. ■



Photograph by Alastair Hotchkiss