

Plant Struck — Life After 20 Years in the Mail Order Business®

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Barbara and I owned and operated Parva Plants out of our nursery site in Te Puna, Tauranga, for almost 20 years. Parva Plants was established in 1968 by Ken and Margaret White and had a reputation for selling interesting plants by mail order to keen gardeners. The company originally set out to grow and sell rock garden plants but the plant focus changed with the times and included such diverse products as Japanese ground orchids and the X-rated *Amorphophallus*, or “Penis Plant.” New products were always an important part of the “garden fashion industry” and the company sourced material both from within New Zealand (N.Z.) and around the world. Producing a minimum of two full-colour catalogues a year with over 600 taxa per catalogue was a challenge and gave us an exciting ride. However, in the end the constant pressure took its toll on our stamina and enthusiasm and we made a call to pass the baton on to new owners Greg and Jenny Tod in 2007.

Having sold the business, which was relocated to Christchurch, we still had the nursery and facilities but very little in the way of plants. It was now time to decide on a future direction and as generating an income was an important component, Barbara graciously offered to go out and get a proper job. This left me and an almost empty nursery. We had retained a number of the treasures we had found or bred over the years and we decided that I should, in the short term, try and commercialize the best of them. During my time with Parva I had also acted for the plant introducers Anthony Tesselaar International (ATI) and they sought to continue with my services on a slightly expanded basis. So the combination of my role with ATI and the development of some of these “interesting” plants of our own seemed like a good idea. Our past experience with “new” introductions and the extraordinary high failure rate, made us very cautious. We knew that whilst the development process could be fun, the outcome was by no means assured. Needless to say, we still drive Toyotas and no plans for the new Lamborghini have been hatched just yet.

Looking back at some of the products we had launched through Parva there was a real mixed bag of material. Some we had bred or selected ourselves, some had been produced by other local breeders, friends from overseas provided material, as did our many keen gardener customers. We had different foliage-coloured forms, we had different flower-coloured forms, we had double-flowered forms, we had sterile forms, and we had variegated forms of various garden plants. Some of the different forms were real improvements, others were just interesting curiosities, but all were fun and exciting to develop. There were of course many false leads including “pink agapanthus”, Apricot Iceberg roses, and a supposed bright red sport of Flower Carpet® Pink which lead us on a merry path. Some we spent years trying to stabilize without success, some we lost and exist now only in photographic images, and for some only the smart Alex names survived; *Thuja* ‘Want to Dance’ was one of my favorites. So with due consideration of what we had done in the past we looked with interest at what remained in the cupboard! Our list of potentially developable plants included a dwarf variegated hosta, a golden-foliaged form of *Liriope* ‘Royal Purple’, a red-foliaged cabbage tree, a sterile white-flowered agapanthus, a sterile

lilac-flowered variegated agapanthus, a variegated alstroemeria, and a series of dwarf pineapple lilies. I shall deal with each product in turn and outline conclusions reached and progress made.

Hosta 'Pacific Blue Edger Variegata'. This is a variegated sport of the lovely dwarf cultivar 'Pacific Blue Edger'. The parent form is a low-growing blue-green foliaged cultivar which makes a nice edging or small pot plant. The variegated sport has a wide green leaf margin and a bold creamy-yellow centre, and the leaves are slightly twisted providing an interesting point of difference. This sported form flowers freely with lilac flowers carried on creamy-white flowering stems. One could argue that this was just another variegated hosta, of which a huge number already exist, and that it didn't really fit the model of a good "new" plant. We thought its dwarf habit and its twisted variegated leaves gave it character but like any modern hosta it must be easily produced in tissue culture. So this was the first hurdle and sadly our little hosta didn't make it over proving to be slow and unstable in tissue culture.

Liriope muscari 'Royal Purple' Sport. *Liriope muscari* 'Royal Purple' was one of a number of *liriope*s Parva introduced to N.Z. It had proved itself to be very popular and was a great improvement on straight *L. muscari*. The sport we found had all the characteristics of the type but in the spring the emerging new growth was a distinctive golden yellow which contrasted with the deep green of older foliage. We slowly increased this plant by division to about 20 large units, potted them up in late winter and then critically assessed them over the next growing season. In early spring we were delighted with the strong golden coloured new growth, the colour held well for a month to 6 weeks and we thought this plant has promise. However, as the foliage started to mature, instead of making a smooth transition to the normal deep green foliage it went through a very undesirable washed out white stage. This very pale foliage proved prone to burning and coupled with the slow rate of increase we decided to abandon this project and put it on the back, back burner. It was never granted a proper name but I nicknamed it 'Roberts Joy' in light of a well known N.Z. member's early appreciation of this now to be forgotten gem.

***Cordyline* GFG**. This is a stunning red-variegated form we had had for sometime which was slowly increased by toe cuttings to the point we had enough to risk attempts at tissue culturing. Material was sent to three labs and after a very lengthy period one lab managed to get it clean and in culture, and multiplication began. It was with huge excitement that we planted out our first batches and with dollar signs in our eyes we sat back and watched and waited. The dollar signs quickly changed to low denomination coinage when we realized that only a low percentage of the tissue cultured plants were true to type. The balance emerged a nice plain dark brown colour but in a world with an abundance of plain-foliaged forms produced in mass by overseas labs our 'Chocolate Brownie', whilst very good, was not going to cut the mustard. Those plants that did remain true we have grown on and they are fantastic and very desirable plants, but unfortunately the costs associated with such a high reversion rate made them un-economic. We are certainly not the only nursery with a desirable-coloured cordyline but until they can be produced reliably in culture they are just interesting curiosities. We have not given up on GFG and continue to work on getting a stable form in culture but we very much risk being cut off at the pass by anyone else who beats us to the draw.

Agapanthus 'Finn'. This is a great dwarf white-flowered agapanthus which flowers and grows well, and is itself a reverted form of an early variegated selection of ours called 'Finnline'. 'Finnline', a play on my youngest son's name, is a very small liriopelike selection with pale foliage whose flowers are white but tend to be distorted and definitely don't set seed. The green form 'Finn' grows and flowers well and for the first 3 years of its observed flowering it set almost no seed. Yahoo, the answer to the biosecurity conscious maiden's prayers, and a great robust, glyphosate-resistant plant for landscape and garden use. Sterility, as many surprised mothers are aware, is a very funny thing. Unless there is a good physical reason for being sterile, situations and certain conditions can conspire to overrule it. This has proved to be the case with 'Finn', and this last season it produced more seed than a so-called sterile selection should. So for anyone looking at agapanthus sterility, we have a great case study for you.

Agapanthus GLV. This is another agapanthus which has thus far also proved to be sterile. We have tried crossing it with other forms and to date we have seen no seed result. So whilst we don't fully understand why it is sterile, we believe it is indeed a eunuch of the plant world. Coupled with its lack of fertility this sport of 'Gayles Lilac' (another plant Parva introduced and whose spelling confuses everybody) is beautifully variegated. This combination of factors with an ability to produce lots of late-season short-stemmed lilac-blue flowers and a dwarf habit makes this an interesting prospect. It would be ideal to produce this beauty in tissue culture (work on this continues) but it does pup well and with care can be increased quite quickly by conventional means. Plants of this selection are currently being distributed to trial sites in Australia, Europe, and the U.S.A. and subject to it performing in these foreign environments we are in with a chance of it being successful.

Alstroemeria 'Red Baron Variegata'. There are numbers of variegated forms of the Peruvian lily around the world. I have seen at least five forms which I rate highly, and I predict many more will appear in the future. This form however is like nothing I have seen before. The foliage emerges lime-green with a broad deep-green margin then with time ages to an almost pure white. The green and white combination, coupled with its bright red flowers makes a real eye-catching spectacle. To some I am sure this is way too garish, but if Santa Claus was to pick a floral emblem, this would be it. Surprisingly the stems are very pale rather than the usual green, and in total you would expect this subject to be very prone to burning and sun damage. To date, as long as plants are kept moist and actively growing they have survived the harshness of our summer sun, but I do think they perform best in light shade. The vigor of this selection is again a surprise and it increases quite well from conventional division. This plant has attracted a lot of interest to date and if it performs as well in the overseas trials as it does at home, it could be a goer!

Dwarf Eucomis Hybrids. The taller-growing forms of pineapple lily are quite well known in N.Z. due in part to the wonderful work carried out by my partner in crime, Eddie Welsh. What is not so well known is that work done overseas with the taller selections has focused on species whose flowers have a B.O. problem, and whilst they are good to look at you don't want to take them indoors. Rather than look at the taller garden or cut-flower selections we found a series of very dwarf hybrid forms which we think have potential as flowering potted plants. These dwarves, like Eddie's selections, are either neutrally scented or lightly fragrant and quite

acceptable to give to both your wife and your mother-in-law. They are very robust bulbs which will flower in 8–12 weeks from potting and we have them in a number of coloured forms. This is a very different crop, and whilst retailers are always calling for something new they tend to shy away from the unproven and avoid arrows in their backs until someone else has done the ground work. We think that there is good mileage in this exciting crop and we are putting quite an effort in to having material grown overseas in the same hemisphere as the potential market and at a very realistic price. However, their future depends very much on their acceptance in the marketplace by the consumers, and this in turn is subject to our providing an attractive, realistically priced product that is presented and marketed well.

So to summarize, since selling Parva Plants we have created a new company called Plant Struck whose current focus is the development and commercialization of new plant taxa. Of the seven forms we began with two have been rejected, two are in the “more work needed” category, and three are at the trial stage. It is both a fun and a frustrating activity and realistically is a big gamble with the prospects of some reasonable returns in the future but requires a frightening short-term injection of cash. How successful we will be is hard to know at this stage but as long as my wife keeps supporting me financially, I will continue to give it my best shot.