

From Genesis to Revelations: A Review of New Plants From Great Britain and Beyond[®]

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This paper will discuss some of the new plants that are becoming available both in the United Kingdom and around the globe and plans to examine some of the reasons behind the success of these new plants. In the context of this paper the work of the plant breeder in collaboration with the grower might be considered the start point (the genesis) of this process of introducing new and exciting and often improved plants, while the end point is the work undertaken by the garden centres who “reveal” the work of the breeder to a wider audience.

In offering an invitation to speak at the Eastern Region conference I imagine there may have been an expectation on behalf of the conference organisers that I would be able to enthral Eastern Region members with a series of stunning photographs of new magnolia, coprosma, and skimmia cultivars, all of which do exist. However the international trade in ornamental plants is driven most often by the ability of an individual to maximise royalty returns and for the grower to gain the greatest profit margins. This has led to breeders and growers bringing a very particular plant type to the market place. Garden centre plant material will be the main focus of attention within this paper and these retail outlets fill their shelves with two types of plants: A–Z and the promotional ranges. Plant breeders more and more focus on securing the promotional slot within the nursery catalogue to ensure far greater volume sales. In the U.K. a Garden Centre may order five *Cornus alba* ‘Elegantissima’ to top up the A–Z bench, while at the same time ordering the latest new herbaceous perennial promotion by the Danish trolley load. No prizes for guessing which plant will make the most money all the way along the supply chain.

Before looking more closely at what I consider to be the main reasons behind successful new plant introductions I would like briefly to explore the significance in today’s world of what have often been considered the trend setters within our industry. Let’s start with gardening writers, are they currently doing much more than commenting on what is already happening within our industry? One of the greatest garden writers and gardeners of the twentieth century, here in the U.K., was a gentleman by the name of Christopher Lloyd. He spent much of his time chronicling his gardening experiments at his home Great Dixter in East Sussex (Fig. 1).

I think it is true to say that he influenced a certain style of gardening which may have increased the sales of both herbaceous perennials and more recently garden exotics but very few of the plants that he either used in his garden or wrote about in books and magazines were the stuff of plant promotions. One notable exception is the plant *Ranunculus ficaria* ‘Brazen Hussy’, which he found growing within his woodland. This is now a lesser celandine of international reputation and is a promotable plant. With any new introduction it is always good to get the garden writer and the full range of gardening media on side, but it is no longer considered an essential as the media has become much more fragmented, and consequently it is more difficult to be certain of where the gardening public is tuning in.



Figure 1. Great Dixter home to Christopher Lloyd.

Has the gardening charity, the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS), had a significant impact in the field of new plant introductions? Clearly an organisation that got started in 1804 has had a major influence on the way in which people in Britain garden, but less so recently, and this probably explains why it is currently playing catch-up, with the new Director General Sue Biggs seeing her main priority as making the RHS more “approachable and accessible.” During my time working for the RHS I was responsible for the growing of many trial plants which were assessed for the Award of Garden Merit. (AGM). These trials often reflected current plant fashions and the decision to assess specific genera more often than not, was based on the amount of new breeding happening within them. Rarely, during the more than 10 years that I was directly involved with the trials, did the award of an AGM lead to that plant being commercialised or widely promoted. The plant trials at RHS Garden Wisley often produced an excellent visual spectacle, but were fraught with difficulties, if attempting to deliver an objective assessment. This subject could take up a complete paper of its own and so I will only provide a couple of examples which are always mentioned when criticising the trials. The trials relate to how they grow at Wisley only, and surely the AGM applies to the clone being trialled and therefore this plant would need to be bulked up and distributed to the trade to maintain the integrity of the award.

Having discussed all the above it is still better for the industry as a whole to have plants being trialled and written about as your new plant may be the one that gets an AGM, is written up in the *Guardian* on Saturday, or has fifteen seconds of fame on the BBC coverage of the Chelsea flower show.

So what is really influencing plant breeding? Most of the new breeding programmes focus on the development of herbaceous perennials that flower over a long period, but come into flower bud early — having just grown out to the edge of the

container, but not extended upwards beyond 30 cm. There are very few shrubs that can meet this specification and so at a stroke most shrubs rule themselves out from the promotable plant category. Plants with interesting colour foliage and texture may creep into the promotable plant category, currently most obviously would be the genus *heuchera*.

There are different reasons why the grower, the garden centre, and the gardener like compact plants but all stem from ease of handling. The preferred pot size for many of the UK's leading suppliers is the 2 L (17 cm), as in the case of *heuchera*, it will fill the pot within 10 weeks during the summer months, providing a great autumn patio offer from August through to Christmas. This smaller pot size reduces transport costs, as a "reasonable" number of plants fit on each layer of a Danish trolley (4 × 6 unit marketing trays) and also ensures that a minimum of 96 plants fit onto a single trolley. The Danish trolley is the number one method of transporting plant material across Europe. The ease with which plant promotions can be delivered to the garden centre has led to them stocking many more promotions, which when placed on hot spot benches, complete with a marketing board and attractive colour labels, sell quickly and in far larger numbers than traditional A–Z lines. A garden centre may purchase a seasonal promotion by the trolley load as compared to five of six plants within an A–Z range.

Before moving on from the added value of promotions to the grower, the trick with any new plant is to match it up with others from the same genus to create a collection. Current hot examples within the U.K. include *phlox* flame, *geum*, *heuchera*, *sedum*, and *scabiosa*. Collections work best when the plants have very similar growth patterns, as nothing is more frustrating than having the bulk of a collection ready when, one or two cultivars are not quite to size. In the promotion's game the grower only gets one or two chances to deliver large volumes to a customer before the next promotion is set to roll in.

So the skill of the plant's person is still paramount and trialling new selections is not simply about assessing the performance of individual plants, it is also important to compare its performance against those plants within existing collections. Fine tuning will take place each year. As an example *Heuchera* 'Jade Gloss' has been growing well for the last couple of years but is just that little bit slower than other *heuchera* in our collection ('Obsidian', 'Mahogany', 'Paris', and 'Plum Royale'). Following assessment 'Silver Scrolls' will take its place and should be a much better match. Are there too many *heuchera*? Well yes of course, however we are still searching for a lime green or yellow that is not prone to badly scorched foliage, to fit into our collection. Our experience of growing *Heuchera* 'Amber Waves'; 'Tn-heu042', Dolce Series Key Lime Pie™ alum root; Rainow Series 'Lime Rickey', and ×*Heucherella* 'Alabama Sunrise' is that they all scorch easily.

A promotion provides the Garden Centre with a quality product, which has good shelf life as its size will less likely lead to drying out or blowing over. Compact, well branched plants full of flower and bud always sell first and fast. This will lead to much quicker bench turnaround and restocking and so increased turnover and profits should follow.

The U.K. gardener likes small attractive plants as many live in properties with small or no gardens and as a result looks to take home impulse purchases that make their way into a flower box, seasonal tub, or the front of a border.



Figure 2. *Geum* 'Totally Tangerine', a recent introduction by Tim Crowther of Walberton Nursery.

ARE THERE ANY PROMOTABLE SHRUBS?

For a shrub to become a sales success it needs to have a number of promotable qualities which will allow it to go beyond the A–Z bench and be recognised as no longer only just a shrub, but a garden centre product with multiple uses. In effect it needs to perform like an herbaceous perennial!

In the U.K. very few shrubs have succeeded in achieving star status. So few in fact I can probably name them all, *Photinia* \times *fraseri* 'Red Robin', *Sambucus nigra* f. *porphyrophylla* 'Black Beauty' and now 'Black Lace', *Choisya ternata* 'Lich', Sundance™ Mexican orange, and *Spiraea japonica* 'Walbuma', Magic Carpet® Japanese spirea. These are all great plants, not in every case exceptional, but have made it for a number of reasons. First they all look great as a container plant and have in most cases more than one season of interest. Crucially all have names that are instantly recognisable, and the gardening public can associate these names with other things that they already perceive positively. A red robin is loved by all and the Sundance kid is admired and glamorised by all, and no other horse in children's literature is more popular than Black Beauty. So a good name is essential.

Why has the excellent shrub *S. japonica* 'Genpei' (syn. 'Shirobana') not taken its place alongside 'Magic Carpet'? Most probably because it has a green leaves and not foliage that turns from red, through gold to yellow. It has a less compact habit, and a far less snappy name. Success with both a shrub and perennial is dependent on its

season of most impact, so a shrub like 'Magic Carpet', that comes into bright red bud in March and continues to change colour throughout the spring and flowers in May and June is always going to more successfully attract the customer's eye than a plant that performs in the height of summer when footfall is dramatically reduced. Little chance then of success for the breeder who is working on new hibiscus, caryopteris, crocosmia, or perhaps lobelia taxa. There are a number of new *Caryopteris* selections being released, all appear to be improvements on existing cultivars, but 'Jason', Sunshine Blue™ bluebeard; 'Lisaura', Hint of Gold™ bluebeard; or 'Lissilv', Sterling Silver® bluebeard are unlikely to sell in large quantities as they are perceived as being more shrub-like than herbaceous, and they flower when customers are less interested in gardening and more interested in summer holidays.

ARE THERE ANY NEW EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULES?

Promotable shrubs are few and far between but if you are able to make a success of the genus *Daphne* then good sales numbers will follow. At Walberton Nursery our objective is to develop good relationships with plant breeders with a view to developing new plants. This process has probably been made easier as we are a nursery with a significant track record in this department as our owner is the plant breeder David Tristram and our general manager Tim Crowther has also introduced a number of plants into the market place. Two of Tim's most recent introductions are *Geum* 'Totally Tangerine' (Fig. 2) and *Yucca gloriosa* 'Bright Star'. In the U.K. Robin White of Blackthorn Nurseries has done some of the best daphne breeding and we are currently building up stock of *Daphne ×transatlantica* 'Blafra', Eternal Fragrance™ summer daphne and the deeper pink sport, 'Pink Fragrance' (Fig. 3).

I am sure that had we not shown the right kind of interest in making Robin's plants a commercial success he would be far less likely to pay our nursery regular visits with some of his latest breeding. These two daphne taxa have the magical quality of compactness and so transcend the shrub category, are in almost constant flower from spring to autumn, and are heavily scented. *Daphne* still has that star quality in the mind of the British public which allows us to add several pounds onto its wholesale price. A plant well worth promoting if you are able to grow it successfully!

The aforementioned *Y. gloriosa* 'Bright Star' lives up to its name, but only outside of the U.K. Despite this plant having been bred on our own nursery, Farplants who are our sales and marketing team have yet to show any interest, but in Europe and North America it is being micropropagated in the hundreds of thousands. The plant has strong yellow and green variegation, a deep red winter hue, and large white flower spikes which are produced on young plants.

IT DOESN'T ALWAYS NEED TO BE BRAND NEW

Often, as long as it is new to your catalogue it is sufficient to encourage the garden centre buyer to take a look at your latest offer. This happened recently for us with the flowering shrub *Desmodium elegans*. This is a plant that is easy to propagate and within weeks will nicely fill a 2-L pot ahead of winter. The following spring its first flush of new growth includes masses of purple panicles. While in the garden this shrub may become a little straggly without careful pruning, grown on a short time frame and sold in early spring it becomes the perfect promotable plant. The key is to have a great sales and marketing team who sell your offer not simply as *Desmodium elegans*. If we sold this as an A-Z shrub we would be lucky to shift a

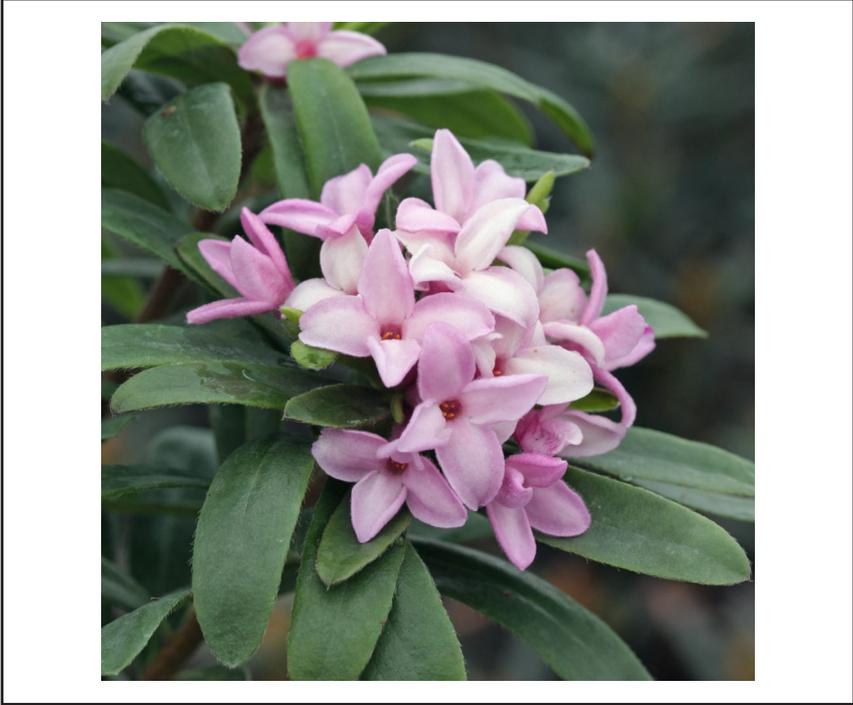


Figure 3. *Daphne xtransatlantica* 'Pink Fragrance', a new introduction from Robin White of Blackthorn Nurseries.

couple of hundred plants each year but by elevating it to a specific time of year and placing it into a promotions catalogue we will sell ten, twenty, thirty times the amount. The price tag is not high but neither do we have to pay a plant breeder royalties. We are always on the lookout for this type of opportunity.

SO WHAT MAKES A PLANT PROMOTABLE?

To conclude I feel that it is a combination of factors that is driving new plant introductions forward. Yes good media coverage will help to lift sales but will not make or break a new plant introduction and it is much more down to providing a plant with a strong instantly recognisable name. A new plant needs to fit the criteria of having its main focus of interest at a time that the public are interested in buying plants, and more often than not these plants must have a pot size no greater than 2 L.

Below in Table 1 is a list of plants featured within the presentation many of which are available through Plant Haven <www.planthaven.com> in the U.S.A. and Plants for Europe <www.plantsforeurope.com> within the U.K. and mainland Europe.



Figure 4. *Scabiosa* 'Butterfly Blue', one of the best promotion plants.

Table 1. Plants featured in this presentation.

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| <i>Caryopteris incana</i> 'Sunshine Blue' |
| <i>Choisya ternata</i> 'Lich', Sundance™ Mexican orange |
| <i>Crocsmia ×crocsmiiflora</i> 'Miss Scarlet' |
| <i>Daphne ×transatlantica</i> 'Blafra', Eternal Fragrance™ summer daphne |
| <i>Daphne ×transatlantica</i> 'Pink Fragrance' |
| <i>Desmodium elegans</i> |
| <i>Erysimum</i> 'Walfrastar' PP13,432 Fragrant Star |
| <i>Euphorbia ×martinii</i> 'Rudolph' |
| <i>Geum</i> 'Totally Tangerine' |
| <i>Helleborus</i> 'Walberton's Rosemary' |
| <i>Heuchera</i> Rainbow Series 'Lime Rickey' |
| <i>Leucanthemum</i> 'Real Galaxy' |
| <i>Rhododendron</i> 'Sunny' |
| <i>Rhododendron jasminiflorum</i> |
| <i>Scabiosa columbaria</i> 'Butterfly Blue' (Fig. 4) |
| <i>Scabiosa</i> 'Pink Mist' |
| <i>Spiraea japonica</i> 'Walbuma' PBR, Magic Carpet® Japanese spirea |
| <i>Spiraea japonica</i> 'Genpei' (syn. 'Shirobana') |
| <i>Yucca gloriosa</i> 'Bright Star' |
