

Chelsea Plant of the Year

A diverse range of interesting new selections was in contention for this year's award.

GRAHAM RICE
discusses the plants
and their breeding



THE FOURTH Chelsea Plant of the Year competition had a record number of plants entered. The top three places went to a shrub, a climber and a patio plant, with perennials, bulbs, fruit, a hardy annual and a herb also featuring on the shortlist.

It is worth summarising two key criteria for accepting entries, as visitors to the show sometimes wonder why plants they expect to see are not entered. To be accepted, plants must be launched at the current Chelsea Show, or introduced since June of the previous year, and they must be included in an exhibit at the Show. Plants already launched at a public show in the UK cannot be accepted.

Forty-nine plants were entered this year, more than ever before. Some proved to be ineligible or were

withdrawn; in this late spring many were simply not showing their key features, usually flowers. Also, some exhibitors had to reduce their entries as each is only allowed to enter a maximum of three plants from any one genus. Senior RHS plantspeople, whose expertise covered the full range of plant types, then drew up the shortlist of 20 plants.

On the Monday of the show, each plant was presented by its breeder or introducer to a gathering of RHS plant committees and their associated membership. At the conclusion of the presentations all those eligible voted for one plant. All but the three plants with the most votes were then eliminated and a second round of voting was restricted to those three.

In setting the scene for the presentation, Dennis Espley, RHS

Council member and managing director of Squires Garden Centres, said of the shortlist: 'We were thinking about the innovation, the excellence and the impact, and the appeal... the novelty and originality of the plants, as well as the public perception of the plants, the demand, the longevity, and what the plants actually look like, their habit and their wow factor'.

This year the Chelsea Plant Of The Year award went to *Mabonia eurybracteata* subsp. *ganpinensis* 'Soft Caress', a selection of a narrow-leafted, spine-free subspecies. In second place came *Clematis* 'Lemon Dream', a fragrant, double-flowered cultivar in the Atragene Group, while third place went to a vegetatively propagated nasturtium with a new flower form, *Tropaeolum* 'Fruit Salad'.

1 *Mabonia eurybracteata* subsp. *ganpinensis* 'Soft Caress'

Noticeably distinct from other mahonias, 'Soft Caress' differs from those derived from winter-flowering *M. japonica* and *M. lomariifolia* in being smaller and more compact and in flowering in late summer and autumn. It differs from spring-flowering *M. aquifolium* in its late season flowers and its long narrow racemes. It differs from all other mahonias in its slender leaflets which are without spines.

Reaching about 1.2m in height, the long narrow and slightly silvered foliage is most distinctive and makes a lovely background to the clusters of 14cm racemes filled with about 50 individual yellow flowers which open from August to October. They are followed by blue-black berries.

Mabonia eurybracteata subsp. *ganpinensis* is native to Guizhou, Hubei and Sichuan in southwest China where it grows in forests, and

on forest margins and streamsides. 'Soft Caress' was selected at ItSaul Plants in Chamblee, Georgia, USA, by Ozzie Johnson from a group of seedlings grown from seed collected from a plant in a private garden in Japan. 'The resulting seedlings seemed to vary in leaflet width, plant vigour, and overall denseness', Ozzie Johnson told me. 'I chose what I thought was the best of the lot for its sturdy growth, superior foliage and overall look'.

Developed by: Ozzie Johnson, ItSaul Plants, USA.

2 *Clematis* 'Lemon Dream'

This new addition to the Atragene Group of spring-flowering clematis, based on *C. alpina* and *C. macropetala*, has four special features. First, the flowers are double, with about four way sepals and up to 15 staminodes in each flower; secondly, they are pale lemon yellow in colour, opening from lime-green buds then fading to ivory white and carried on purple pedicels; thirdly they are unusually large for plants in this group, approximately 12cm across; and, fourthly, they feature a noticeable grapefruit scent.

Happy in most soils and in sun or partial shade, and reaching about 1.8–2.4m in height, the main flush of flowers is in May with a less profuse reblooming in summer. Pruning is minimal; tidy up after the May flowering if necessary.

'Lemon Dream' was developed by the Polish clematis breeder Szczepan Marczyński at his nursery in Pruszkow, southwest of Warsaw. Other new introductions from Marczyński this year include double, pink-flowered 'Pink Dream', also an Atragene cultivar.

Developed by: Szczepan Marczyński, Clematis - Container Nursery, Poland. ➤



2



3

3 *Tropaeolum* 'Fruit Salad'

For the fourth year in succession, Thompson & Morgan's plant breeder, and RHS Cory Cup winner, Charles Valin has a plant in the top three of the Chelsea Plant of The Year. After a *Buddleja*, a *Verbascum*, and a *Digitalis*, this year his success comes with a *Tropaeolum* in a new style. But he also has a Thompson & Morgan customer to thank.

In 2001 Patricia Newman, a T&M customer, sent the company an unusual nasturtium with serrated petals. Valin crossed it with a wide variety of nasturtium cultivars but the cross with 'Strawberry Ice', with a traditional flower shape but golden yellow flowers with a vivid red spot at the base of each petal plus blue-green leaves, was the one that brought success. After more than a decade of selection and crossing, the result is 'Fruit Salad'.

Its compact, semi-trailing habit is ideal for containers; its flowers are dramatic in shape and colour; it produces virtually no seed, so it blooms continuously; the blue-tinted foliage has pointed, instead of rounded lobes. As well as all that, 'Fruit Salad' also features a sweet spicy scent.

Developed by: Charles Valin, Thompson & Morgan, UK.

RUNNERS-UP
(listed in alphabetical order)

4 *Aeonium* 'Poldark'

Last year two aeoniums developed by Claire Batten and Jeff Rowe at Cornwall's Trewidden Nursery featured on the Plant of The Year shortlist, this year they have another. 'Poldark' is a woody-stemmed succulent with rosettes of shining black and purple foliage at the tips of the shoots. Reaching about 60cm in height with a spread of 45cm,



4

'Poldark' retains its colour through the winter, especially if kept dry, and is drought tolerant.

Rowe told me: "Poldark" is of mixed parentage; the two main parents are *Aeonium* 'Zwartkop' and *A. simsii*. 'Poldark' was the very first *Aeonium* that we trialled four years ago and from a very young age its leaves looked different from 'Zwartkop', and as it grew it started to multi-branch almost immediately. We felt that it showed great commercial promise as it keeps compact and does not show bare stems as 'Zwartkop' does'.

Developed by: Claire Batten and Jeff Rowe, Trewidden Nursery, UK.

5 *Allium schoenoprasum* (chives) 'Cha Cha'

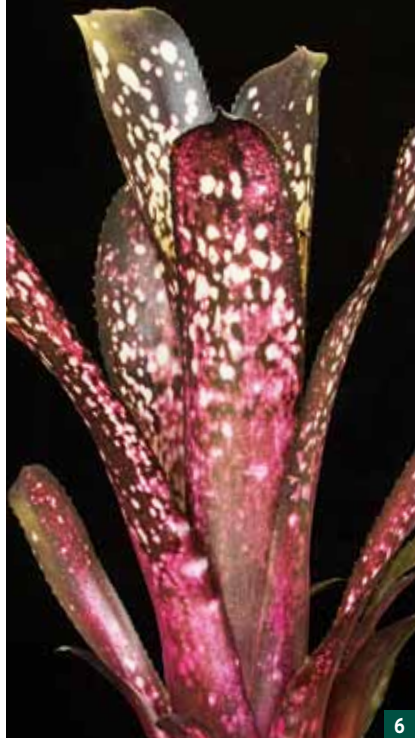
This is an interesting example of how a breeding programme that fails to achieve its goal sometimes throws up a plant with good qualities of an entirely different kind. The aim of Burpee's breeding programme in the Netherlands was to create new cultivars of chives that were fine-leaved, high yielding and resistant to



5

thrips. This failed, but in 2010 this unique form of chives was spotted by Burpee's Henk van der Velde and Simon Chapman as they inspected the thousands of plants in their trials.

Instead of heads of flowers, 'Cha Cha' produces clusters of small



plantlets with slender leaves. These heads can be used as a garnish or in small bouquets. They can also be pulled apart and rooted, although the plant is protected and propagation for sale is not permitted. The leaves can of course be used in the same way as more familiar forms. Plants reach about 45–60cm in height, and can be grown in the same way as other chives.

Developed by: Henk van der Velde, Burpee Europe, the Netherlands.

6 *Billbergia* 'Hallelujah'

This easy-to-grow bromeliad features a stiff, upright, slightly flared rosette of about 15 glossy leaves about 40cm tall. Each leaf is rich purple in colour, becoming darker towards the base, and is covered in irregular white and pink spots and blotches. The flowers are held on red stems and are purple with a white tube.

This is a vigorous plant, happy in the house or conservatory, and soon developing into a clump of rosettes.

It is ideal for newcomers to growing billbergias.

'Hallelujah' is the result of a cross between two cultivars of *Billbergia vittata*, 'Domingos Martins' and 'Ed McWilliams'. It was made by Florida hybridist Don Beadle and is the most popular of his hybrids in North America. It is widely used as an outdoor landscape plant in Florida. **Developed by:** Don Beadle, USA.

7 *Clematis* 'Kaiser'

This double-flowered *Clematis* from Japan has two distinctive features. Firstly, its flowers are large, up to 12cm in diameter, with eight broad, overlapping, deep pink guard sepals maturing to a fresher, clearer shade and sometimes flushed with white or green. These surround more than 200 inner sepals which may be fine and slender or intermediate in width between the guard sepals and the filamentous sepals in the centre. These open in green, yellow-green or yellow, and mature to pink. A range of flower forms may be present on the same plant, opening in May and June. Secondly, the plant only ➤

reaches 1.5m in height, so is ideal for a container or small garden.

'Kaiser' is a sport of the single pink 'Allegra', and found in 1997 by Japanese clematis specialists Fukutaroo Miyata and Kazushi Miyazaki. Originally to have been named 'Emperor', this name was rejected by the Japanese PBR authorities, so was changed to 'Kaiser'. **Developed by:** Fukutaroo Miyata and Kazushi Miyazaki, Japan.

8 *Diascia Sundiascia Rose Pink* (Sundiascia Series)

Interest in diascias has moved from an early focus on them as borderline hardy perennials to their current popularity as prolific summer container plants. Now, with the release of the Sundiascia Series, hardiness is again treated as an important feature; the plants are hardy to -15°C. The habit of those in the Sundiascia Series is also distinct from the rounded form of those intended for tubs and baskets, with their 7.5cm upright spikes showing influence of *D. rigescens*, and tightly packed with yellow-eyed, pink flowers. Good drainage is important, along with cutting back in early spring.

The Sundiascia Series is the latest development from Jimmy Jones and David Jones of Penhow Nurseries in Monmouthshire, who have been breeding diascias for 25 years. **Developed by:** Jimmy Jones and David Jones, Penhow Nurseries, UK.

9 *Fragaria* (strawberry) 'Malling Centenary'

In his presentation, Adam Whitehouse of East Malling Research highlighted the one feature in which all gardeners are interested: 'Its outstanding characteristic is its superb, deliciously sweet flavour', he said, 'and it has a slight background of acidity which gives the true British strawberry flavour'.

This is a mid-season strawberry that fruits from late May to late June, a few days ahead of the well known and long established commercial cultivar, 'Elsanta'. Its other outstanding qualities include its uniform shape, its high gloss which is retained after picking, and its good fruit size which makes it easy to pick. The trusses are very long, and fall away from the canopy so the flowers are easy for bees to pollinate and the fruits easy to pick. It is higher yielding than 'Elsanta', with a higher proportion of top quality fruits.

'Malling Centenary' was selected in 2006. It is named to mark the centenary of the fruit breeders East Malling Research in Kent. **Developed by:** East Malling Research, UK.

10 *Heuchera* 'Thomas' (Fox Series)

Much of the *Heuchera* development work in both North America and Europe aims at ever more exotic foliage colours. However, this third in the Fox Series from Richard Fox and Vicky Fox of Plantagogo is more demure. As Vicky Fox told me: 'Not everyone wants a really brightly coloured plant'.

They selected 'Thomas' for its large flowers on exceptionally long stems and its attractive foliage; it will blend well into any border. Its waved young foliage is fresh green with a silvery patina and deep maroon veins and matures to dark olive green. The flowers, on unfashionably long green stems, but ideal for cutting and for an architectural look in the garden, are creamy green.

Derived from *H. americana* and *H. cylindrica*, most crosses involving



9

the latter yield shiny green foliage. This is a striking exception. It is named for Richard and Vicky's son, a basketball professional who always wished he was a little taller. 'So we called the tallest *Heuchera* flower we have ever seen after him', said Vicky. **Developed by:** Richard Fox and Vicky Fox, Plantagogo, UK.

11 *Lathyrus odoratus* 'Chelsea Centenary'

As RHS Cory Cup winner, Dr Keith Hammett reminded us in introducing his 'Chelsea Centenary' at the Plant Of The Year presentations, different groups of sweet pea enthusiasts have different priorities: 'Most of the breeding of sweet peas is done by exhibitors', he said, 'who only want four flowers on a stem. The public want more flowers and this extends their vase life'.

'Chelsea Centenary', originally named 'Crystal', is a multiflora sweet pea with up to eight, ruffled, pale lavender-blue flowers on long stems. It is a lovely shade, well-scented and when the lowest flowers start to fade they can be nipped off leaving later flowers to mature.

Developed by: Dr Keith Hammett, New Zealand.

12 *Lavandula angustifolia* Platinum Blonde ('Momparker')

A number of variegated lavenders



10a



10b



13

Graham Rice / GardenPhotos.com



11



12

have been introduced in recent years but few have proved to be good garden plants; it looks as if Platinum Blonde ('Momparler') may be the exception.

In spring, the familiar grey evergreen foliage of *Lavandula angustifolia* is augmented by a bright, creamy yellow margin. As the months pass the colouring becomes softer – less yellow and more creamy – and when the spikes of soft-blue flowers appear in summer the effect is more harmonious than might have been expected earlier. By the end of autumn the variegation is surprisingly muted but then, in spring, the brightness returns in the new season's growth.

It was discovered by Juan Ismael Momparler Albors in 2006 as a sport in a crop of *L. angustifolia* at his nursery near Valencia, Spain. His find has proved to be tight and bushy in growth, with relatively short flower spikes at about 25cm. It seems more robust and hardier than other variegated lavenders.

Developed by: Juan Ismael Momparler Albors, Momparler Viveros, Spain.

13 *Leucanthemum x superbum* 'Real Neat'

This is one of a new and expanding range of British-bred Shasta daisies, marking a striking departure from the familiar daisy flower form. Each

ray floret of 'Real Neat' is formed into a tube and flared at the tip, similar to those of a spoon chrysanthemum, and the flare is split into three or four lobes. The florets are in multiple rows. This is the first *Leucanthemum* with these fluted rays.

Reaching about 60cm in height and a spread of about 45cm, the plants are stout and self-supporting. If deadheaded they flower through the summer from June until autumn. The leaves are dark green and unusually small and neat.

This is one of the first selections to be released by breeders Richard Read and Keith Lintott of RealFlor, Sussex. The others are 'Real Dream', 'Real Galaxy' and 'Real Glory'. More are on the way, and they are also working on *Gaillardia*.

Developed by: Richard Read and Keith Lintott, RealFlor, Sussex, UK.

14 *Lilium* 'Sweet Desire'

This is a first amongst lilies. The popular Tango Series of Asiatic lilies features large, dramatically bicoloured flowers whose dark centres break into speckles over a paler background towards the tips, but with only a slight scent. 'Sweet Desire' is the first tetraploid LA hybrid (created by crossing a Longiflorum and an Asiatic lily) with a Tango lily as the Asiatic parent. The result is a lily with very large, pale yellowish cream flowers, sometimes suffused in ➤

pink, and fading to ivory white, with a neat pattern of burgundy spots towards the centre. Plants also have the bonus of sweetly scented flowers.

Hardy down to -14°C, this is a lovely lily for well-drained soil in the border, and also makes a fine cut flower.

Developed by: Arie Vletter, Vletter & Den Haan, the Netherlands.



14

15 *Lilium* 'Zirconia'

This is a strong-growing OOT lily, which means that it is an Oriental lily crossed with a Trumpet lily, and the result backcrossed to an Oriental lily. It features highly fragrant flowers in an unusual apricot shade, opening from upward facing buds to face outward in an attractive head held on a strong stem. As the flower matures, it becomes darker towards the throat and paler at the edges.

It was selected from a batch of seedlings in 2006, from a cross made in 2003. After trials in Europe and Japan it has proved adaptable and resilient, reaching a height of 1.1–1.3m, and maturing 90–100 days after planting. It is resistant to leaf scorch.

Developed by: Arie Petersen, Marklily, the Netherlands.



15

'Snow Pixie', is now available. It flowers from June to September and features a fragrance reminiscent of sweet peas. It is a fine plant for sunny containers or borders, can be sown direct, and is easy to grow.

Developed by: Adam Sparkes, K Sahin Zaden BV, the Netherlands, a subsidiary of Takii & Co, Japan.

16 *Lupinus nanus* 'Snow Pixie'

The long established 'Pixie Delight' mixture of hardy annual lupins, *Lupinus nanus*, features 40cm plants in blue and pink shades, including bicolours, along with a white. The well branched plants produce short spikes over a long season from a spring sowing and are nicely scented.

A single-colour cultivar, royal blue 'Blue Pixie', was selected and introduced by Kees Sahin back in 1995. It proved impossible to develop a pink-flowered cultivar of sufficient quality, but after many years of selection this white cultivar,



16



17

17 *Nepeta grandiflora* 'Summer Magic'

This cultivar is a short, bushy and prolific catmint reaching just 20cm in height, and spreading to 60cm across when well established. Usually coming into flower in mid May, it continues through to autumn without needing to be cut back, as repeated branching leads to the development of a long succession of flowering growth. The lavender-blue flowers are carried on reddish stems. These do not collapse outwards,

a fault in other catmints which leaves the flowers in a ring around an empty centre.

This is a selection made by Malcolm Spencer, who raised seedlings from open-pollinated *N. grandiflora* 'Bramdean'. Unlike the popular *N. racemosa* 'Walker's Low', it is completely ignored by cats. Spencer also developed the Croftway Series of *Phygelius*.

Developed by: Malcolm Spencer, Croftway Nursery, Sussex, UK.



18



20

18 *Rosa Dunham Massey* (‘Beajelly’)

One of the last seedlings selected by the late Peter Beales, this is a repeat-flowering rose in the old-fashioned style. It has fully double, quartered, candy pink, lightly perfumed flowers set against healthy, glossy green foliage. Reaching about 1.2m high it can be grown towards the front of a sunny border, in a container or, if planted against a wall, will behave as a short climber.



19

This rose was chosen in 2011 from a number of as yet unnamed seedlings by Damian Harris, Head Gardener of Dunham Massey in Cheshire, to mark the opening of their new rose garden. It is the result of crossing two earlier Peter Beales roses, ‘Yokohama’ and ‘Roseball’, both introduced in 2002.

Developed by: Peter Beales Roses, Norfolk, UK.

19 *Streptocarpus* ‘Harlequin Damsel’

Dibleys were the winners of the first Chelsea Plant of the Year Award with *Streptocarpus* ‘Harlequin Blue’ back in 2010, in 2011 S. ‘Sioned’ was shortlisted, last year S. ‘Harlequin Lace’ was shortlisted, and this year the sixth cultivar in their Harlequin Series was chosen for the shortlist. All the plants in the series feature unusually short leaves which are much less likely to be damaged than those of traditional types, along with a neat habit. More than the usual number of flowers are produced in each cluster over a long flowering season. They are all bicolors.

‘Harlequin Damsel’ can be in flower for 10 months of the year, with up to 10 large flowers on each stem, and the stems are short so the flowers are well poised above the leaves. The upper lobes of each flower are white, the lower are

slightly creamy and heavily patterned in purple veins, reminiscent of the veining on a damsel fly’s wings.

Developed by: Lynne Dibley, Dibley’s Nurseries, North Wales, UK.

20 *Viola* ‘Windmill’

Hardy perennial violas were once a significant feature of the Chelsea Flower Show; the displays staged by Richard Cawthorne of both established cultivars and new introductions of his own breeding always gathered crowds. But the end Cawthorne’s displays coincided with interest shifting to seed-raised annual violas. Now, the work of Robert Chapman has again caught the attention of gardeners and show visitors.

Robert began his breeding programme five years ago. ‘We are always trying to aim for fragrance and prolific flowering together with strong sturdy stems’, he told me. One of his first crosses produced ‘Windmill’, which is interesting for a number of reasons.

Firstly, it is very strongly scented. Also, its long-lasting flowers are an unusual and pretty combination of pure white and lavender-blue, with the latter on the backs of the upper petals seeping through to the front, before maturing to almost completely white. They are also prettily frilled. And finally, the flowers, which open in an unusually long season from May to September, are held on tall 15cm stems. These are strong enough to support the blooms well and makes them ideal for use as a cut flower. ‘Windmill’ has proved fully winter hardy after being cut back in autumn.

Developed by: Robert Chapman, Victorian Violas, Lincolnshire, UK.

GRAHAM RICE is Editor-in-Chief of the *RHS Encyclopedia of Perennials*. He also writes the New Plants blog at <http://rhsnewplants.co.uk>