



Royal
Horticultural
Society

Sharing the best in Gardening

The Garden

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**David Austin
and his finest roses**

**RHS MASTERCLASS:
PRUNING PERENNIALS**

**Awash with wisterias
at Wickham Place
Farm, Essex**

*Entrancing blue
poppies*

ANALYSIS

Prizewinners fuel new plants demand

Plant sales in garden centres are declining, so activities such as the RHS Chelsea Flower Show Plant of the Year are vital to give plant breeders a boost

Author: Anisa Gress, *The Garden News* Editor

In recent years, the value of sales of plants through garden centres has taken a turn for the worse, falling from more than £1,726m in 2007 to £1,437m in 2012.

Naturally, weather is a major driver on plant sales – more rainy days between April and June mean a decrease in sales – but so too is the squeeze on the economy. In addition, new homes have smaller gardens and fewer people own their own house.

Yet, according to the Horticultural Trades Association, plant sales have fared relatively well in the economic downturn. By contrast, online sales and price comparisons have badly affected garden furniture sales – these have dropped from £1,154m in 2007 to £665m in 2012.

All eyes on Chelsea

Trying to secure the 'plant pound' while gardeners are under pressure to spend their money elsewhere has never been more important.

With the horticultural media firmly focused on RHS Chelsea Flower Show in May, there is an opportunity to present tempting new plants to gardeners here and abroad. Since 2010, the Society has organised the Plant of the Year competition to shine a spotlight on plants exhibited at the show. Publicity is aimed squarely at gardeners, and winning growers have found that demand quickly outstrips supply.

Competitions to identify the best, or most novel, plant introductions have become more common at events for the horticultural trade

The exhibit for RHS Chelsea Flower Show Plant of the Year in the Great Pavilion is a popular attraction.



in the UK and EU. Plants are usually chosen by a panel of experts – typically a cross-section of the industry from journalists to breeders. This allows wholesalers to assess which new plants will appeal to gardeners, and it gives retailers confidence to stock them.

Demand certainly outstripped supply when delicate *Anemone Wild Swan* ('Macane001') took the Chelsea crown in 2011. Exhibited by Hardy's Cottage Garden Plants, it was found as

a seedling in the late 1990s by Scottish nurserywoman Elizabeth MacGregor. The plant stood out because of its vigour and white blooms with lilac-blue on the reverse, produced from May until the first frosts.

Encouraged by plantsman Roy Lancaster, the new plant was named and stock was 'bulked up', but no-one could quite believe the demand created by its award. 'We are a small nursery and sell several hundred Wild Swan in a season, perhaps up to >>>

Demand for the Plant of the Centenary

To celebrate 100 years of the RHS Chelsea Flower Show in 2013, a special competition encouraged gardeners to vote for their favourite plant from one chosen to represent each decade of the show.

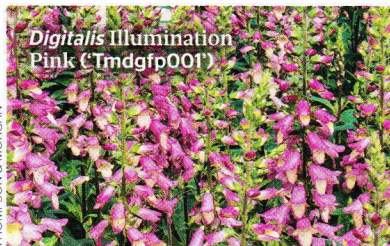


The winner was *Geranium Rozanne* ('Gerwat', left). More than 12 million plants have been sold since its launch in the early 1990s by Blooms

of Bressingham. After the announcement, Alistair Lorimer, Blooms' European Business Development Manager, said plants allocated for 2014 sales were snapped up by retailers.

'Awards impart credibility that can instil confidence in gardeners and non-gardeners. They also help negotiate the first hurdle in making cultivars available to the public, convincing wholesalers, growers and retailers to take them on,' he said.

ANALYSIS



THOMPSON & MORGAN



RHS / CAROL SHEPPARD

Past winners of RHS Chelsea Flower Show Plant of the Year



VAN SOU & KOOT



RHS / CAROL SHEPPARD

1,000. At plant shows, we would invariably sell out on the first day,' said Alastair MacGregor. 'It has been our bestseller for the last three years.' Because it is slow to propagate conventionally, Wild Swan is now being micropropagated.

The first winner

Directly after winning the first RHS Chelsea Flower Show Plant of the Year, in 2010, *Streptocarpus* 'Harlequin Blue' – a breakthrough in breeding with its yellow lower lobes – became the top-selling plant for Dibleys Nurseries in Denbighshire. Lynne Dibley, who bred the new cultivar, said four years on this is still the case. 'We sell around 5,000 of S. 'Harlequin Blue' a year compared to

3,500–4,000 for other cultivars,' she said. The business uses the competition logo (pictured right) wherever possible. 'It's done us the world of good, and brought publicity back into the Great Pavilion,' said Lynne.

Last year's champion, *Mahonia eurybracteata* subsp. *ganpinensis* 'Soft Caress' (used in 'The SeeAbility Garden') was the first shrub to win. Listed by 19 nurseries in *RHS Plant Finder 2014* (five in the 2013 edition) it is now on sale in garden centres. Priced at £20 or more, 'Soft Caress' is a more considered buy, but online retailer Crocus reports a 500 percent increase in sales since its win.

Possibly the most impressive sales figure comes from Thompson & Morgan (T&M), Suffolk, which sold

The best garden product

Following the success of the plant competition, the RHS organises a similar event for Chelsea's trade exhibitors. Now in its fourth year, the RHS Chelsea Garden Product of the Year recognises innovative and 'on-trend', recently-launched products for use in the garden.

Previous winners have been the Flexi Spray from Hozelock, the Slot & Lock Connectors range from Harrod Horticulture, and Kadai's Charcoal Maker.

All of this year's 17 shortlisted products will be displayed in an exhibit at the show. The finalists range from high-value inspirational garden artworks and furniture to tools and seeds.



RHS CHELSEA
GARDEN PRODUCT
OF THE YEAR 2014



AND THE
WINNER IS...
The RHS Chelsea
Flower Show
takes place from
Tue-Sat 20-24
May, and the
winner of the RHS
Chelsea Flower
Show Plant of the
Year 2014 will be
announced on
Tue 21 May.

For all show
information, visit:
[www.rhs.org.uk/
chelsea](http://www.rhs.org.uk/chelsea)

25,000 *Digitalis* Illumination Pink ('Tmdgfp001') within days of it winning in 2012. 'It wasn't just the quantity that surprised us,' said Michael Perry, T&M's New Product Development Manager, 'it was the speed that we sold them. Everyone wanted it at the same time.'

It quickly became the company's highest-selling first-season perennial; sales have now reached several hundred thousand. It remains one of the company's top-selling lines and Michael believes it won because it was so innovative. 'The winning plant needs to be much more than "another perennial" or "another petunia",' he said. 'It needs to have a unique selling point and offer something plants have not done before.' ●

New lavenders move out of the field and into the garden

A range of lavenders with unusual origins are among the plants hoping to win Chelsea Plant of the Year 2014.

Lavandula x intermedia selections 'Heavenly Angel' (white, pictured), 'Heavenly Night' (purple, pictured) and 'Heavenly Scent' (blue) share a strong perfume, but are late-flowering with shorter flower spikes and stems than most other *L. x intermedia* hybrids at 25-30cm (10-12in). This brings to the market something gardeners have been after for some time: late-flowering alternatives to *L. angustifolia* 'Hidcote'.

Their origins stem from a project to find the best oil-producing lavender for the UK climate. Currently *Lavandula x intermedia* 'Grosso' is favoured, and it makes an excellent garden plant, too, but in wet weather its habit can open, making flowers difficult to harvest.

To find more-compact plants with shorter flower stalks but good yields of high-quality oil, Downderry Nursery in Kent has been growing on young plants exposed to a plant-based mutagen (a substance that encourages mutations), a method not used on lavenders before.

The project began in 2003 as DEFRA-funded research by East Malling Ornamentals and Downderry Nursery. Through chromosome doubling, sterile *L. x intermedia* became fertile. Simon Charlesworth of Downderry Nursery describes it as 'like discovering a Pandora's box'. The Heavenly Series and fertile *L. x intermedia* have been used by Simon to cross with *L. angustifolia* to find plants for UK field growth.

❖ See p17 for more plants being launched at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show this month.