

**? What do you think?** Do you enjoy the range of plants offered by retailers, or are there too many similar selections? What group of plants do you think are being over produced? Write to: Viewpoint, The Garden, 4th Floor, Churchgate, New Road, Peterborough PE1 1TT; email: [thegarden@rhs.org.uk](mailto:thegarden@rhs.org.uk); please include a postal address

**DO YOU RECALL** Goethe's ballad, *Der Zauberlehrling* (*The Sorcerer's Apprentice*)? While the boss is away, his trainee invokes magic with bucket and broom, but soon loses control. Sometimes I think that plant breeding has gone that way. The steady stream of new cultivars, during the past century, has swollen to become an uncontrollable flood and we have grown giddy with the surfeit.

If this growth continues we will be engulfed by a tsunami of toffee-coloured heucheras, green, blue or variegated hostas, and un-needed rose selections. We have enough *Clematis* to clothe the Great Wall of China and yet every year there are more (in *RHS Plant Finder 2009–2010* there are 867 different *Clematis* compared to 399 in 1995). Why such a gross excess? During the past five years, 696 new *Hemerocallis* were introduced; but who is buying them? And what effect does this breeding have on the way we garden?

#### Doing enough for diversity?

You could argue that gardens are richer for the wide choice, and the fatter the *RHS Plant Finder* becomes, the better. Big numbers, within a single genus, means that differences can be slight, enabling subtle choices for finely tuned planting schemes. But hold on: there comes a point where such distinguishing characteristics become trifling. And for too long, too many plants are released to the unsuspecting buying public without having been fully tested or trialled for long-term garden use.

How much smaller must the differences be, for example, between one white and green snowdrop and another? With such star selections as *Galanthus* 'Magnet', 'S. Arnott' or 'Straffan' the features are striking and, as a result, they have become classics. But for many others (there really are hundreds of different *Galanthus*), you need a magnifying glass or DNA test to tell which is which.

With certain genera, the launch of new selections has been akin to book publishing. Plants appear amid media hype and, like new books, maybe in vogue for a while. But they can soon disappear; and that's a shame because if new plants drop into obscurity before they have been tested, no-one will know how good they might have been.

Have plant breeders been developing too many similar, unreliable or unremarkable garden plants? **Nigel Colborn** thinks so, but wonders if gardeners have the last laugh. Photography by Neil Hepworth

# Nurturing the nondescript

A short shelf life can make formal plant trials meaningless. It takes time to know just how good a plant is, but when the RHS gives a plant its Award of Garden Merit (AGM), resulting from the Society's trial or committee work, it will only hold the AGM if the plant is available. If a cultivar becomes obsolete as soon as the trial is completed, for example, all that work has been a waste of time.

#### Spoiled choice

It is possible, but a paradox, that more might mean less. When dahlias were dying on their feet as border plants a decade ago, the tide was turned by the dark-leaved *Dahlia* 'Bishop of Llandaff'. Introduced in 1924, with an AGM in 1928, this superb plant began to turn up in floral displays after years of obscurity. It sparked a dahlia revival and began to sire huge numbers of dark-leaved progeny. So far, so good – but the problem now is that the range of border dahlias is growing like a vast bubble. How many of these introductions are any good? And, importantly, how are the more conventional, green-leaved dahlia cultivars doing?

Such an excess can result in a drop in quality. Many of the exquisite new snowdrops – yellow ones, selections with green smudges on their outer tepals – lack vigour or are painfully slow to multiply. Among dahlias, habit and vigour are more inconsistent than ever. If there were fewer, better-performing cultivars for general garden use, gardeners might have a less-confusing choice.

The tenor of this piece may seem wholly negative, but that is not the intention. There are equally strong arguments in favour of so glorious a richness. Many gardeners are inveterate collectors and variety is what motivates them. Those famous snowdrop lunches would be dull affairs without lots of cultivars to squabble over. Cushion-saxifrage nutters and cranesbill anoraks will want to grow every last selection – and good luck to them.

Where choices are excessive, but with subtle differences, we gardeners can do the selecting. That gives us control, taking it from traditional plant raisers who may once have been more ruthless in their elimination of seedlings that fell short of their ideals. Plant breeders have, for some time, used different criteria from gardeners in their selection. To them, shelf life and ease of transport are crucial, as is appearance in the 'plantaria' where most purchases are impulsive. A gardener, on the other hand, needs plants that will perform, for as long as possible, with minimal input and little need for pest or disease control.

A viable plant industry is essential to supply gardeners who will always, let's hope, have an insatiable hunger for new stars as well as old classics. But there are limits to what we can absorb, and the current surfeit makes it difficult to pick gems out of the dross. After all, among the flotsam in that varietal tsunami, there may be a slug-proof hosta one day, or a dahlia that needs no deadheading or even, heaven forbid, a bright orange snowdrop. ■

*Nigel Colborn* is a writer and broadcaster

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