

# MERITING AN AWARD

The Award of Garden Merit (AGM), given to ornamental plants and fruit and vegetables, is at the core of the Society's plant trials work. **Matthew Wilson** looks at its history and future and, on p70, starts a new monthly series on AGM winners

**FOR MANY GARDENERS**, some of our most popular and successful plants – blush pink *Rosa* 'New Dawn' perhaps or yellow-leaved *Choisya ternata* Sundance ('Lich') – are reliable performers. But how many people who bought them knew that they had received the RHS Award of Garden Merit (AGM)?

The AGM, the highest RHS accolade a plant can have, was instituted to help gardeners select the best plants for their garden. By choosing a plant with the award, gardeners can be sure that it is: 'of outstanding excellence for ordinary decoration or use; available; of good constitution; not requiring highly specialist growing conditions or care; not particularly susceptible to any pest or disease; and not subject to an unreasonable degree of reversion in its vegetative or floral characteristics'.

This is not an insubstantial list of aims, and one that most gardeners would no doubt be happy to know applied to the plant they were buying. But does the AGM deliver? Is it reasonable, given the wide range of growing conditions in British gardens, to expect a system based on trialling plants often (but not exclusively) at RHS Garden Wisley, Surrey, to provide a fair assessment? The AGM has managed to remain useful for gardeners, but ideas are now being shaped to make it even more relevant.

**Trials history**  
The Award of Garden Merit has its roots in the very *raison d'être* of the Society's formation: the furtherance of the science and practice of horticulture. Trials of plant material began soon after the Society was established in 1804,

**FIELD OF DREAMS?**  
The trials field (below) at RHS Garden Wisley, Surrey welcomes many of the plants that the RHS trials – some of which go on to receive the RHS Award of Garden Merit

with the systematic trialling of plants starting in the 1860s.

But it was the move to Wisley at the turn of the last century that reinvigorated the trials programme, which since 1970 have been held on the trials field (known to many as the Portsmouth Field) and Deers Farm (a site in Wisley village, owned by the RHS but not part of the garden). In more recent years, AGMs have been awarded by assessing National Plant Collections from around the UK, trials within The Glasshouse, and also by 'round table' discussions at committee meetings. Hundreds of cultivars may be trialled at any time, and are judged by the members of the relevant committee.

The idea of enforcing consistency in the conferring of awards – different committees tended to have their own judging criteria – eventually took root in the form of the AGM, and the first award was made for *Hamamelis mollis* in 1922. Since then, several thousand plants have been awarded AGMs. But the award is not static, and new plants are constantly being looked at – many plants have their award rescinded as a consequence of better plants being bred, a plant's constitution proving questionable over time or falling out of favour with growers.

And therein lies the rub; how can the RHS ensure that AGM plants really are the best of the up-to-date bunch, whether you garden in Glasgow or Godalming? Kim and Stephen Rogers of Dove Cottage Nursery in Halifax, West Yorkshire have little doubt about

the value of the AGM. 'RHS members will actively seek out an AGM plant over others,' says Kim, 'but novice gardeners tend to know little about it.'

For Michael Marriott of David Austin Roses, Wolverhampton (which does not quote AGM plants in its catalogue), there 'needs to be more notice of the opinions of gardeners. Trials are tricky things; they are so subjective – you can turn out roses that produce plenty of flower and are disease free but are as dull as hell. Trying to get independent thought on roses is difficult.'

The Rogers and Michael Marriott both see the opportunity for the horticultural trade, and the gardening public, to have a greater say in the assessment of potential and existing AGM plants, but is this realistic? According to Nigel Colborn, Chairman of the RHS Trials Advisory Committee, it is. 'The Award of Garden Merits are reassessed every 10 years,' he says, 'but the Society's new trials strategy will enable an even broader range of plants to be assessed under many different conditions.'

## Broadening the AGM appeal

Kylie McKenna, RHS Head of Horticultural Relations, has the task of overseeing the reinvigoration of the AGM, which she feels will have an 'incredibly strong future'. 'The notion that anyone buying a plant can be reassured that they are choosing a plant that will perform, has to be good,' she says. 'But to keep the AGM up to date the Society recognises that it needs to actively get the support and

opinion of other interested parties.'

In order to achieve this, she is looking to enlist the support of a quartet of allies: horticultural colleges, specialist societies, the gardening media and the horticultural trade – for whom the AGM has the potential to be a useful sales tool.

There is also the need to ensure that the Society's plant trials are timely and that judging criteria are standardised. 'We need to select the right plants to trial, ones that are relevant to UK gardeners,' says Kylie. 'For example, there are some plants on the trials field that have been there for a number of years without an award, and others that are no longer in cultivation so can't even be bought.' She sees one additional ally in the furtherance of the AGM: 'there's the potential for every RHS member to become a "trials person", feeding back their experience of plants'.

In our somewhat brand-obsessed world, the AGM has a strong heritage. But more importantly it has the potential to be the first thing a gardener looks for when buying plants; this would in turn place the RHS at the forefront of supporting and advising the choices of Britain's gardeners. Engaging a wider audience to keep the AGM list up to the minute, and a genuine reflection of plants that grow well in the broadest possible locations, would help ensure that AGM plants really are the pick of the pack. ■

*Matthew Wilson* is former RHS Head of Creative Development

## AGM FACTS

**The RHS Award of Garden Merit promotes plants that are 'excellent for ordinary garden use'.**

- The AGM was instituted in 1922, but today's judging criteria are different from the original.
- A new AGM list was started in 1992: all existing awards were rescinded, though some plants have been re-awarded an AGM.
- Awards are made after a period of assessment by RHS committees; each committee has its own particular area of expertise and draws upon the knowledge of nurserymen, growers and horticulturists.
- More than half of the AGM list has been awarded by 'round table' committee discussion, not by trials at RHS Garden Wisley.
- The entire AGM list is reviewed every ten years. The first review took place in 2002; 1,200 plants lost the award, while a further 900 were added to the list. The next review of AGM plants takes place in 2012.

@ Visit [www.rhs.org.uk/trials](http://www.rhs.org.uk/trials) for more on trials, AGM plants, committees, the trials office and to download RHS Plant Trials Bulletins.

● Read Peter Seabrook's Viewpoint in support of plant trials (October 2009, pp690–691)



ALL CLINDY / RHS

**JUDGING IN ACTION** To review plants on trial, members of the RHS plant committees (made up of 171 people) consist of volunteers (above), many of whom are nursery owners, growers or respected horticulturists



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