

# Comment

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RHS / TIM SANDALL

## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

### Gardeners are constant optimists

Editor of *The Garden*, Chris Young

Hope and aspiration are perennial traits of gardeners. Our constant desire to improve on the previous year's growing, and to explore different techniques, mean that we never get bored – there is always something new ahead. On the whole, we are an optimistic bunch.

Much of that optimism is fed by the ever-increasing range of plants we encounter. As the British Iris Society celebrates its 90th anniversary this year, we are reminded of the vast range of bearded iris cultivars, bred, selected and 'improved', from which gardeners can choose (pp54–59). Some of the most recent selections, such as *Iris* 'Flames of Passion' (introduced 2008) rub shoulders with *I.* 'Jungle Shadows', more than 50 years old but still one of the best.

This element of constant evolution living alongside some of the best 'tried and tested' keeps interest burning, for both the avid collector and enthusiastic home gardener. Add in other genera with ever-increasing lists of new cultivars – hostas, heucheras, hemerocallis and snowdrops to mention but a few – and it

seems clear that the thirst for novelty endures.

Plant breeding also ties in with changes in society's needs – examples include the current interest in 'miniaturising' shrubs for our smaller domestic gardens, or the ever-burgeoning choice of new vegetables. During the 60-year reign of HM The Queen, Patron of the RHS, we have seen just such interests come and go. Fashions fluctuate; attitudes alter. As Tim Richardson outlines (pp89–92), the gardening world has changed markedly over those six decades. Some preoccupations, such as 'grow your own', have come full circle: 'Dig for Victory' was still fresh in the mind when Princess Elizabeth acceded to the throne in 1952. Other concerns, such as environmental awareness, are relatively recent.

Along with the rest of the nation, the RHS will celebrate The Queen's Diamond Jubilee, both this month at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, and in June at the four RHS Gardens. It is an opportunity to stop and consider just how much has changed – and just how much has not. In this jubilee year, long live the optimistic gardener. ●

## FROM THIS ISSUE

*The mix of alien and native plants found in a typical garden provides plenty to eat for a wide range of native herbivores*

Ken Thompson: Gardens are ecosystems

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*Few flowers demonstrate the dazzling spectrum of colours found among the many cultivars of bearded irises*

Anne Blanco White: Rainbow flowers

» Pages 54–59

## DID YOU KNOW?

### Why two names are better than one

Author: **Mike Grant**, Editor, *The Plantsman*

As gardeners we must familiarise ourselves with scientific names so we can buy the correct plant or look up its details. The two-part species name, known as a binomial, is made up of a genus name, for example *Echinacea*, and a specific epithet, such as *purpurea*.

Translations of specific epithets (*microphylla* for example means 'small-leaved') are not always as useful as they might appear. *Betula pendula* is not always pendulous, *Ribes sanguineum* (inset) is not blood red, and *Scilla peruviana* is of Mediterranean origin.

The invention of binomials by 18th-century

naturalist Carolus Linnaeus brought welcome order to plant names:

previously they may have been 20 words long. And the rules of naming ensure that each species' name is unique.

If an existing name is accidentally reused for a new species, the first-named plant retains its name, and a new one is found for the second.

Binomials also free us from the charming disorder of common names – 'bluebell' may be a species of *Hyacinthoides*, *Campanula*, *Mertensia* or *Sollya*, depending on whether you live in England, Scotland, North America or Australia, respectively. ●

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