

Roy Lancaster visits...

Potash Nursery

This Suffolk mail-order nursery grows a huge range of splendid, long-flowering and easy-to-cultivate fuchsias. Many also prove perfectly hardy

Author: **Roy Lancaster**, VMH, broadcaster and member of the RHS Woody Plants Committee. Photography: **Tim Sandall**

A polytunnel at the nursery filled with fuchsias in June, many of which are trained as standards.

Potash Nursery in Suffolk, owned by Mike and Sarah Clare, grows a range of *Fuchsia*, some grown to cascade from hanging baskets.

Potash Nursery

Address Cow Green, Bacton, Stowmarket, Suffolk IP14 4HJ.
Tel: 01449 781671.
Website: www.potashnursery.co.uk
Sales: via mail order and at shows.
Open: not open to public (plants may be collected by appointment).
Catalogue: 4 x first-class stamps.



One of the first shrubs I planted in my present garden is *Fuchsia* 'Mrs Popple' which, 30 years on, is still thriving. Its flowers, a combination of scarlet calyx and a violet-purple corolla, are suspended on slender stalks beneath leafy branches from late spring through summer into autumn. Relatively compact in habit (60–90cm/2–3ft tall and as much across), it grows in a narrow bed on the edge of a patio and deserves its popularity as a reliable, hardy fuchsia for UK gardens. Its name commemorates the wife of a Mr Popple, in whose garden it was noticed in 1930 by plantsman Clarence Elliott of Six Hills Nursery, Stevenage. It had been grown by the Popples for more than 20 years, but it is not recorded whence it had originated.

I am also fond of creeping, small-leaved New Zealander *F. procumbens*, which I grow in a hanging basket suspended from a tree branch in summer and in a frost-free glasshouse in winter. The curious, small, upward-facing, varicoloured flowers in summer are sometimes followed by bloomy plum-purple berries. It has great novelty value.

Of course, these are but two of a huge number of fuchsias available. Many are tender and often grown for summer-bedding displays or in hanging baskets and containers. However, an increasing number of hardier cultivars can be overwintered outdoors, especially in sunny, sheltered sites. Many of these can be obtained from expert fuchsia growers, including Potash Nursery.

Taking on a nursery

Suffolk's leading fuchsia specialist, in the hamlet of Cow Green, near Stowmarket, Potash Nursery grows a wide selection of less-hardy fuchsia cultivars as well as a good range of pelargoniums. Both are exhibited at the UK's top flower shows, including the RHS Shows where in the last 14 years they have won 29 Gold and 61 Silver-Gilt medals. It was, however, the fuchsias I asked to see when visiting the nursery in June last year. While impressed by the tender cultivars, I focused on those described by owners Mike and Sarah Clare as being 'hardy throughout the UK if planted in the ground – not in pots'.

The Clares bought the house and nursery, including stock, in November 1998 and the following month staged their first exhibit at an RHS London Flower Show. The nursery had been owned by Jim Blythe, now retired and recently made an Associate of Honour by the RHS. Mike worked in the computer industry until the early 1990s when he was made redundant. He then attended Merrist Wood College in Surrey to take a National Certificate in Commercial Horticulture. This was followed by work experience at several nurseries and garden centres, including one where he met Sarah. She later worked at RHS Garden Wisley, but the couple decided to start their own nursery. Having long grown fuchsias in his own garden, Mike had developed a passion for them – so the opportunity of taking on Potash Nursery was a challenge not to be missed.

Among the hardy selections of *Fuchsia* grown at Potash Nursery is delightful *F. magellanica* 'Lady Bacon' (above).

Suffolk nursery



The latest fashion? Roy teases fuchsia growers Mike and Sarah (above) in one of their polytunnels.

Getting the best from fuchsias

The nursery comprises a large multi-span glasshouse plus several polytunnels. Here, fuchsias are propagated from cuttings and grown on for sale, while those destined for shows are groomed and housed. Plants are sold by mail order as well as at shows – the nursery is not open to visitors unless collecting pre-ordered plants. New cultivars are purchased or commissioned from two breeders, which keeps the collection updated, though many of the best sellers are well-proven cultivars of long standing such as *Fuchsia* ‘Mrs Popple’, which Mike described as ‘a great beginners’ plant – I can’t fault it’.

When I asked if there was an ideal time for planting fuchsias, Mike said, ‘in our experience planting is best done two months before the first frosts’. He believes fuchsias grow in most garden soils, avoiding extremes of wet and dry, though a partially shaded, moist but well-drained site produces the best display. Ideally, he says, new plants should be established in a minimum of a 9cm (3½in) pot before planting out. ‘Anything smaller is best grown on for a while before planting.’ I enquired about planting hardy fuchsias in pots outdoors year round. Mike explained that while the plants are normally hardy, in pots their roots are liable to suffer frost damage in severe winters – so they often need protection to keep them going.

Having enjoyed the morning viewing their fuchsias, I challenged Mike and Sarah to pick just 12 hardy selections (see opposite), their favourites that they would recommend, especially to anyone growing fuchsias for the first time. Some of them are new, some have been grown for more than 100 years – but all make first-rate garden plants. ●

‘I challenged Mike and Sarah to pick just 12 hardy selections.’



Potash's pick of hardy fuchsias

1 *Fuchsia* ‘Rufus’ Height (h) and spread (s) 60–90cm (2–3ft). A selection with turkey-red flowers throughout, borne over a long period. I once planted this fuchsia in an Irish hotel garden; it proved such an attraction that some visitors couldn’t resist taking a piece home.

2 *F.* ‘Schneewitcher’ h 75cm (2½ft) s 60cm (2ft). The flowers have a waxy red calyx (tubular base of flower) and a particularly wide violet-blue corolla (petals).

3 *F.* ‘Tom West’ Meille h 60cm (2ft) s 90cm (3ft). An old cultivar from 1853 with rich carmine and purple flowers. Grown, however, for its variegated leaves that are pale green with bold, irregular creamy-white margins and cerise tints and veins.

4 *F.* ‘Star Wars’ h and s 60–75cm (2–2½ft). Has flowers with a white calyx and recurved lobes (pointed, petal-like sepals) above a lavender-blue corolla. An unusual colour combination for a hardy fuchsia.

5 *F.* ‘Beverley’ h 75cm (2½ft) s 90cm (3ft). Shapely flowers, each with a rose calyx, and recurved lobes above a deep pink corolla.

6 *F.* ‘Genii’ h 60cm (2ft) s 90cm (3ft). Has lime-yellow leaves on red stems. Flowers with vivid red calyx and strongly reflexed lobes above a rich violet corolla. One of the best of its kind as its foliage is not known to revert.

7 *F.* ‘Dorothy Hanley’ h 75cm (2½ft), s 60cm (2ft). Flowers double, dark red-flushed aubergine calyx and steeply reflexed lobes crowning a corolla of a dark aubergine.

8 *F.* ‘Grayrigg’ h and s 60–75cm (2–2½ft). Has small flowers, each with a pale tubed calyx and pale pink, green-tipped lobes. Corolla palest blue, streaked purple; apple-green leaves.

9 *F.* ‘Hawkshead’ h and s 120–150cm (4–5ft). Robust plant with tiny dark green leaves. Flowers are small, white, tipped green in bud, opening to a white calyx with green-tipped lobes and white corolla. Enjoys light shade.

10 *F.* ‘Remembrance’ h and s 90–120cm (3–4ft). Flowers double with rose-coloured calyx and strongly reflexed lobes above corolla of pale pink, veined red. Popular, striking cultivar.

11 *F.* ‘Lottie Hobby’ h and s 45cm (1½ft). Cultivated since 1839. Charming shrub of dense growth with tiny, glossy leaves. Small flowers with rose-coloured calyx and corolla plus a white pistil (female reproductive parts). I grow this in a sheltered, sunny border. Cold winters cut it to the ground but it regrows in spring.

12 *F.* ‘Royal Academy’ h and s 90cm (3ft). Has large, double flowers with a pinky-red calyx and steeply rising lobes above a purple corolla. Introduced by Potash Nursery in 2005.