

Chelsea Plant of the Year

A diverse range of interesting new selections were in contention for this year's award.

GRAHAM RICE discusses the plants and their breeding

The 2012 winner was *Digitalis Illumination Pink*, a difficult-to-achieve cross between *Digitalis* and what was *Isoplexis*



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All photographs Julian Weppell / RHS unless otherwise stated

THE 2012 Chelsea Flower Show again hosted the Plant of The Year competition, in which new plants vie for this prestigious award. The competition is open to any plant which is on view at the show, and which has never been exhibited at a show for gardeners before. Plants previously seen at trade shows are eligible.

Forty plants were entered this year and, after a few were withdrawn and others checked by RHS staff to ensure that they really were new, the RHS Plants Advisory Committee drew up a list of 20 finalists.

On the afternoon of 21 May each finalist was presented to assembled

members of RHS plant committees for voting. They considered the following three qualities:

- Innovation: how different is this plant from what has been seen before?
- Excellence and impact: what level of impact does the plant have? Is it horticulturally excellent?
- Appeal: is the plant likely to have wide appeal?

The winner this year was a new hybrid foxglove, *Digitalis Illumination Pink* ('Tmdgfp001'). In second place came a modern successor to the 19th century 'Mrs Sinkins' pink – *Dianthus Memories* ('WP11 Gwe04'), while in third place was a new double hyacinth, 'Royal Navy'.



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scented, 'hurling out its fragrance at me, stimulating the senses' as Caroline Bourne of Whetman Pinks put it at the Show.

A hybrid resulting from a hand cross of two carmine-flowered cultivars, it has been trialled extensively and is sufficiently versatile to be grown in containers, borders or along the garden path, without staking. It is said to be resistant to frost and heat, drought tolerant, and easy to grow in a well-drained sunny position. It also won Overall Best New Plant Introduction at the 2011 National Plant Show.

Developed by: Whetman Pinks

3 *Hyacinthus orientalis* 'Royal Navy'

In the 19th century, double-flowered hyacinths were fashionable but these days we see very few, and mainly the reddish-pink 'Hollyhock'. But Jan Pennings of Dutch bulb specialists JS Pennings de Bilt was inspired by those old cultivars.

'I'm interested in history', he told the judges at the Show, 'and reading old books about hyacinths I figured that in Victorian England there was great interest in double hyacinths. I was inspired by that to start a breeding programme for double hyacinths. 'Blue Navy' is the first result of that breeding'. Six years after first making crosses, this seedling was selected and it took a further 20 years to propagate enough bulbs to be offered for sale.

With double, purple-blue flowers filling each spike, individual florets have petals with a dark stripe along the centre, with a paler zone along each edge.

After an RHS trial earlier in 2012 it gained an Award of Garden Merit and was also highly ranked by visitors to the trial.

Developed by: Jan Pennings (JS Pennings de Bilt) ➤



Tim Sandall / RHS

1 *Digitalis* Illumination Pink ('Tmdgfp001')

A hybrid between our native biennial *Digitalis purpurea* and the perennial *Digitalis (Isoplexis) canariensis* from the Canary Islands. When Thompson & Morgan plant breeder Charles Valins first made this cross the plants were considered to be in different genera. It was thought that crossing the two plants was not possible.

Reaching 60–90cm in height, and branching strongly from the base, the long spikes of Illumination Pink are filled with flared flowers which are vivid pink on the outside and honey-amber within, sometimes delicately

spotted. Ideal in sun or partial shade, Illumination Pink is reputedly perennial and flowers from June to November.

First crosses were made in 2006 and of the 100 seedlings raised the one combining best colour with best habit was selected. After plants survived the winter of 2010 in an open field, propagation by tissue culture began.

Thompson & Morgan's Paul Hansord, presenting the plant to the RHS plant committees, said: 'It's sterile, it's hardy, it's been down to -15°C last year, it's base branching, it flowers for a long, long time, it doesn't need staking. We have a foxglove now that is perennial, and a wonderful colour'.

Developed by: Charles Valins (Thompson & Morgan)

2 *Dianthus* Memories ('WP11 Gwe04')

In 2004, Whetman Pinks decided to raise a modern version of the fragrant white garden pink 'Mrs Sinkins', first introduced in 1863. Memories is the result. It differs from 'Mrs Sinkins' in being repeat flowering, with a better vegetative habit, much reduced calyx split and a spicy fragrance.

Memories reaches about 30cm in height, with fully double, white flowers which are very strongly

RUNNERS-UP

(listed in alphabetical order)

4 *Aeonium* ‘Cornish Tribute’

This is the first of two *Aeonium* cultivars that were chosen as finalists, both developed by Trewidden Nursery in Cornwall. They are the first introductions resulting from crossing several *Aeonium* species. Any seedlings which looked interesting, about 500 in all, were grown on in 9cm pots and then the most promising 50 moved on to 1.5l pots for final assessment.

‘Cornish Tribute’ is compact in habit, reaching about 45cm high and 20–30cm across. It makes unusually tight clumps of foliage, the individual rosettes of glossy leaves are garnet coloured on the outside and apple-green in the centre. When dry, the leaves do not drop, it is drought tolerant, and ideal in containers on a sunny patio.

The cultivar was named after the favourite beer of nursery owners Claire Batten and Jeff Rowe – Tribute pale ale brewed by Cornwall’s St Austell Brewery. **Developed by:** Trewidden Nursery

5 *Aeonium* ‘Logan Rock’

This second selection by Trewidden Nursery is compact in growth,



reaching about 75cm high and 45cm across, and is unusually freely branching so avoiding the sparse and straggly look of some older cultivars.

The stems carry glossy, lance-shaped, dark purplish leaves, which are green in the centre, and the colouring is fairly stable except in dry conditions when it darkens. It is suitable as a container specimen and is very drought tolerant.

It was named after the nursery owners’ local pub at Treen, just a few kilometres from the nursery.

Developed by: Trewidden Nursery



6 *Choisya x dewitteana* ‘Aztec Gold’

This yellow-leaved form of *Choisya x dewitteana* brings together qualities from the established cultivars Sundance (‘Lich’) and ‘Aztec Pearl’.

‘Aztec Gold’ is an evergreen shrub which develops a rounded habit and reaches about 1.2m high and as much across. The narrow leaflets are rich gold at the tips and a more greenish yellow towards the base. In spring and early summer, clusters of almond-scented, white flowers appear, with a second flush in autumn. It is also weather resistant, the narrow leaflets shedding water easily so preventing frost damage.



Initial crosses to create this plant were made in 2000 by Alan Postill of Hillier Nurseries. Over the next 12 years more crosses were made, using the strongest and most promising seedlings, until 'Aztec Gold' was chosen and named.

Developed by: Hillier Nurseries

7 *Clematis* 'Shikō'

Discovered as long ago as 1985 by Teruo Isogai, who runs a cut flower nursery in Japan, this cultivar is a sport of the popular 'The President'. The name of this unusually well-formed, double-flowered clematis means purple light.

Jonathan Gooch of Thorncroft Clematis, who presented the plant at the Show, pointed out that the large, deep purple-blue flowers, with a paler central bar to each sepal, are unusually neat and even, unlike some double blue clematis which can be a little untidy. He also explained that 'Shikō' is good in production and propagation, developing a good root system early and flowering well on a compact plant. It retains the qualities of its long-established parent plant, being tough and reliable. It flowers in May and June, then again in August and September.

Developed by: Teruo Isogai

8 *Dianthus barbatus* Green Trick ('Tamarisou')

Many of the green cut flowers seen in florists, particularly carnations, are dyed, so the arrival of a naturally green-flowered *Dianthus* looks promising. Developed in Japan for the cut-flower market, the flowers of this cultivar of *Dianthus barbatus* develop into a mass of finely dissected bracts, creating a ball about 5cm across. Plants are sterile so propagation is by tissue culture.

Thompson & Morgan's Paul Hansord described Green Trick at the Show. 'It's sterile, so as a cut flower it



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lasts for a long, long time, and in the garden we've been amazed. We grew it in a container and we didn't stake it – it's normally 60cm tall and it falls over and you get these green puffs of flowers that just fill in. It looks superb in a patio pot if you put other colours with it.

Developed by: Miyoshi & Co



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Tim Sandall / RHS
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9 *Digitalis* 'Silver Cub'

Foxgloves with foliage covered in silver hairs are always popular, for the attractive rosettes provide bold structure and tactile texture long before the flowers open. Derived from *Digitalis purpurea* subsp. *heywoodii*, 'Silver Cub' has two other valuable features.

Firstly, the flowers are white, opening from cream buds, and held in bright green bracts on silvered stems. Each flower features a light dusting of delicate spots in the throat. Secondly, plants flower in their first year from an early sowing. This might upset some purists but is a valuable feature in the trade as it dramatically shortens the production cycle. 'Silver Cub' can also be treated as a biennial.

Plants are relatively short, 40–50cm, so can be used in containers or mixed borders.

Developed by: Takii & Co

10 *Heuchera* 'Circus'

A vast number of *Heuchera* cultivars have come on to the market in recent years; 24 were new in the *RHS Plant Finder* last year, 27 this year. Many originate in North America but an increasing number of fine introductions are being



Tim Sandell / RHS

developed in France by Thierry Delabroye. 'Circus' is his latest.

The foliage of 'Circus' changes colour as the seasons pass. In spring, the foliage is mint green with burgundy veining; in summer it changes to a colour that Plantago's Vicky Fox describes as 'buttery mint'. The veining fades as the weather warms, but then in autumn the leaves change to pink, colouring most intensively in the coldest months. The flowers, from May to July, are reddish pink.

Developed by: Thierry Delabroye

11 *Leucanthemum x superbum* 'Freak!'

Leucanthemum x superbum, Shasta daisy, is an old favourite that is again receiving some attention from breeders. Cultivars with more intense yellow flower colour have appeared in recent years, but 'Freak!' retains the more familiar white colour but makes other valuable advances.

Firstly, 'Freak!' is dwarf – reaching about 33cm in height in its second year and spreading to about 50cm. Secondly, it features an unusually long flowering season, beginning in May. Plants in flower at Chelsea had not been forced and will continue to bloom until the end of summer if deadheaded. The individual flowers are 5–6.5cm across with multiple layers of rather frilly ray florets around a deep yellow eye. Useful at



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the front of the border or in containers, 'Freak!' does not need staking.

Developed by: Har Stemkens (Syngenta Flowers)

12 *Lilium* 'Bethan Evans'

When presenting this plant, Sarah Hyde of HW Hyde & Son reminded us that martagon lilies have a reputation for snatching a year or two of unexpected dormancy, especially when disturbed or shocked. Dr Ieuan Evans, president of the North American Lily Society, has created a new martagon which retains all the best qualities of the group but he has bred out this tendency – 'Bethan Evans' does not go unhelpfully dormant for a year or two, leaving a gap in the border. Evans has been trialling the plant for many years to prove the point.

Named for the breeder's granddaughter, 'Bethan Evans' has speckled, flared flowers in soft pink which mature to yellow as they age. The flowers retain the martagon perfume and it is easy to grow, being vigorous and disease resistant.

Developed by: Dr Ieuan Evans

13 *Lilium* 'Cream Tea'

Two or three years ago Elizabeth Hyde, of HW Hyde & Son, saw this lily in the Netherlands and was instantly captivated. It was in a glasshouse of Dutch lily breeders



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Vletter & Den Haan, the most productive breeders of cut flower lilies in the world.

Raised by lily hybridizer Arie Vletter, who is unusually insistent that his lilies have a beautiful perfume, this Oriental-Trumpet hybrid was selected and named 'Cream Tea' for its colouring. Rich cream in its heart, fading to white at the tips of the tepals, and with a faint red stripe along the length of each one: 'It looks as if the cream tea has some jam with it', said Sarah Hyde.

It is about 90cm in height, extremely hardy, vigorous and easy to grow, and thrives in any good soil.

Developed by: Arie Vletter (Vletter & Den Haan)

14 *Nepenthes* 'Linda'

Nepenthes are not easy for most gardeners as they need hot and humid conditions, which most of us cannot provide. 'Linda' solves this





problem as it is tolerant of low humidity. Not only that, but the dusky red pitchers are unusually large, up to 40cm long, beautifully coloured and can last up to three months.

'Linda' was created by Toon Kuipers who runs a large wholesale bromeliad and *Nepenthes* nursery in the Netherlands. In 2009 he back-crossed 'Rebecca Moss' on to one of its parents, *N. ventricosa*, and selected 'Linda' as the best of the seedlings for the size and colour of its pitchers. It is named for his daughter.

Developed by: Toon Kuipers

15 *Osteospermum*
'In The Pink'

Osteospermums have become increasingly familiar in recent years. Numerous compact and bushy cultivars, in a vast array of colours, have found their way into garden centres as plants for summer



containers. 'In The Pink' represents a new look at the style of an older era.

Almost evergreen, and proved hardy down to -15°C over the last three winters, 'In The Pink' makes a plant about 30cm high with a spread of 45cm. It is drought tolerant and can be grown either in the border in most reasonable free-drained soils or in a container. It presents its flowers facing upwards so that they display themselves perfectly when viewed from above, and each daisy has a ring of vivid pink ray petals surrounding a golden disk with a blue centre.

'In The Pink' was selected from seedlings of open-pollinated *Osteospermum jucundum* var. *compactum* on the basis of its prolific flowering and long, May to October season. It was then trialled for four years.

Developed by: Fairweather's Nursery

16 *Petunia x atkinsiana*
Gioconda Series

Twenty five years ago plant breeder Renato Faraone Mennella had a dream to breed a better petunia. It needed to be both heat and especially cold tolerant, would flower in short days and would be weather and disease resistant. His company, Farmen, is based at the foot of Vesuvius in Italy and Gioconda Series is the result.



After three years of trialling in many different climates, including Suffolk, UK, and Russia, the first five colours in the series – red, white, blue and two vivid shades of pink – are now available. The plants branch well, are prolific and mound-forming, and ideal as the centrepiece in a basket.

The idea is to plant them in March, to kick start the bedding plant season. Until recently, *Gerbera* cultivars were not thought of as hardy but new introductions have proved that they can be can be. Petunias may be the next to make this transition.

Developed by: Renato Faraone Mennella (Farmen)

17 *Rosa* **The Queen's Jubilee Rose ('Beajubilee')**

While championing the vast range of heritage roses so beloved of British gardeners, Peter Beales Roses has also been developing new roses. These are their 'modern classics', which combine the long flowering of modern roses with the classic, old-fashioned look.

The latest of these is The Queen's Jubilee Rose featuring fully double, goblet-style, fragrant, white flowers which are delicately flushed with peach and which keep coming right through the summer. Peter Beales Roses recommend fortnightly feeds with liquid tomato food.

Presenting the rose at the Show, Ian Limmer of Peter Beales Roses said: 'This rose was bred by Amanda Beales, Peter's daughter, and we've been putting it through stringent tests over the last eight to ten years. It's proven very reliable, it grows very well in a pot, it's a very good bedding rose. In commercial terms it grades out very well as it has five or six stems on each plant and at the end of those stems it has four or five buds'.

Developed by: Amanda Beales (Peter Beales Roses)

18 *Streptocarpus*
'Harlequin Lace'

First flowering in 2010, 'Harlequin Lace' has large, darkly veined, lobelia-blue flowers with the three lower lobes of the flower boldly patterned in purple and white on a slightly yellow-tinted background. The leaves are tightly compact, the flowers stems short, and the plant flowers for 10 months of the year. Speaking at the Show, Rex Dibley said: 'We're now getting more colour and patterns into *Streptocarpus*'.
Developed by: Lynne Dibley (Dibley's Nurseries)



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19 *Streptocarpus*
'Sweet Melys'

The first *Streptocarpus* cultivar with a strong scent, 'Sweet Melys' brings scent from a wild species that is not a good houseplant to the prolific and accommodating types with which we are familiar.

For the fragrance, Lynne Dibley went back to *Streptocarpus vandelurii*, a 'unifolia' type with one enormous leaf which makes it unsuitable as a house plant. By crossing it with the best houseplant types she was able to develop a neat, rosetted plant that first flowered in 2008. It retains a scent, variously described as of lily-of-the-valley or lemony wood polish.

The flowers, over 100 of which may be open at once, have more substance than those of other cultivars. They open white, with pale blue margins and a golden throat, and the blue colour matures to palest pink.
Developed by: Lynne Dibley (Dibley's Nurseries)

20 *Tillandsia* 'Samantha'

The raiser of this plant, Pamela Koide Hyatt of California, is an internationally known bromeliad expert. In 'Samantha' she has brought together the qualities of two species collected in different parts of



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Mexico in the 1980s, *Tillandsia kalmbacheri* and *T. mooreana*. The broad foliage of the former is combined with the darker, glossier leaves of the latter. The plant is infused with a delicate pink colouring which blends well with the yellow petals, and the candelabra-like flowerheads can hold their colour for more than six months.

'Samantha' appreciates plenty of light, and rain water rather than tap water.
Developed by: Pamela Koide Hyatt (Bird Rock Tropicals)

GRAHAM RICE is Editor-in-Chief of the *RHS Encyclopedia of Perennials*. He also writes the New Plants blog at <http://rhsnewplants.co.uk>



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