Meet the 2019 RHS Master Growers

To celebrate the work of the most impressive nurseries and growers in the UK and Europe, the RHS Master Grower scheme helps highlight their work through special displays at major RHS Flower Shows.

Author: Marc Rosenberg, freelance garden writer.
Photography: Neil Hepworth
Specialist nurseries are the lifeblood of the horticulture industry, preserving rare plants and introducing the next generation of novelties. Growers’ unrivalled depth of knowledge and willingness to share expertise is what makes the RHS Flower Show circuit invaluable to gardeners. In 2016, at RHS Flower Show Tatton Park, the RHS Master Grower scheme was born – a concept designed to shine a spotlight on specialist nurseries at the pinnacle of their game.

RHS Master Grower displays are lined up for five Flower Shows in 2019. Master Growers stage larger, central displays in floral marquées unlike other exhibits; they are not judged. RHS Floral Marquee Manager Helen Boon says, ‘RHS Master Grower is a way to celebrate the skill and expertise of specialist nurseries that come to RHS shows, singling out those that exemplify the best in growing. We want Master Grower displays to be must-see destinations for show visitors.’

Master Growers must propagate a high percentage of their plant material and cultivate most of the stock at their nursery. Breeding of new selections is a bonus, as is production of unusual plants alongside favourites. Medals awarded to the nursery are scrutinised, along with a record of how they have supported previous RHS shows. To decide who is worthy of Master Grower status, the show teams work with the Shows Advisory Group to make the final decision.

The result has been memorable Master Grower displays, with bigger than usual, walk-through exhibits, accompanied by bespoke photographs taken by Neil Hepworth. Fibrex Nurseries at RHS Malvern Spring Festival 2017 displayed pelargoniums, ivies, ferns and southern-hemisphere plants. WS Warmenhoven transported visitors to the Netherlands at Tatton Park show in 2017, with rows of field-grown alliums. The 2019 crop of Master Growers have big ambitions for this year’s shows. Here is a look at how their plans are progressing.

**Show details and tickets**

Visit rhs.org.uk/shows or book by phone (excluding shows held at RHS Garden Wisley: 0844 495 9664 for PHONE COMPANY ACCESS CHARGE. BOOKING AND TRANSACTION FEE APPLY). See also p179.

---

**RHS Master Growers**

---

**Chrysanthemums Direct**

**RHS Flower Show Tatton Park (17–21 July)**

What is the nursery’s speciality?

Chrysanthemums Direct grows more than 420 cultivars of Chrysanthemum for garden and exhibition growing, offering young plants propagated from stock at its nursery in Knutsford, Cheshire. Specialties include Incurved, Spray, Anemone and Reflexed chrysanthemums.

How has the nursery evolved? RF Lawrence & Sons, parent company of Chrysanthemums Direct, was founded in 1958, and spans 14ha (35 acres), with 2.4ha (6 acres) of glasshouses, producing 1.25 million cut flowers per year. In 2008 the firm identified an opportunity to sell young chrysanthemum plants to the public and Chrysanthemums Direct was born. Manager Martyn Flint (below, right) says: ‘I’d worked on the flower-show circuit for 30 years and saw exhibits of chrysanthemums where people were asking for plants, but no-one was selling. There was a gap in the market, which led us to become the largest supplier of young chrysanthemum plants to the public in the UK.’ In 2018, Chrysanthemums Direct sold 120,000 young plants. The nursery has been awarded 59 RHS Gold medals in the past decade.

What’s the plan for Master Grower? Martyn says: ‘There will be two elements to the design. The first will tell the story of how we grow chrysanthemums commercially for the cut-flower market – from taking cuttings to the finished product – with information boards. The second will be chrysanthemums in a naturalistic garden setting, rather than the fairly regimented displays we normally put on. As a Master Grower, we can be more creative, without the judges looking over our shoulder.’

**Mendip Bonsai Studio**

**RHS Malvern Spring Festival (9–12 May)**

What is the nursery’s speciality? Mendip Bonsai Studio is run by John Trett (above), a leading bonsai specialist who offers up to 38 bonsai workshops per year. John holds 88 RHS Gold medals. His nursery at Shepton Mallet in Somerset is open by appointment only.

How has the nursery evolved? John, aged 15, used to pass a house with a Japanese garden while walking his dog. The sight of 40-year-old acers, oriental stone features and ginkgoes ignited his interest in bonsai and he started collecting miniature trees. He says: ‘I joined a club in the 1970s and started giving talks in the 80s.’ In 1996, after redundancy, he turned his hobby into a career with the launch of Mendip Bonsai Studio. John says: ‘I’d had enough of the rat race. Even though I now work more hours, it’s enjoyable and I get a sense of fulfilment.’

John has hundreds of trees spanning up to 1,000 species – including 250 Japanese maple cultivars at his 1.35ha (4 acres) nursery with a polytunnel and three workshops for tree styling.

What’s the plan for Master Grower? The display will feature British-grown bonsai, accent plants and demonstrations. John says, ‘It will show plants from young seedlings to finished trees. Ten people will demonstrate using juniper, cedar, cypress, larch, maples, beech and elm.’ Visitors will see demonstrations of ‘clip and grow’, wiring and potting techniques.

---

**Scamp’s Daffodils**

**RHS Flower Show Cardiff (12–14 April)**

What is the nursery’s speciality? Scamp’s Daffodils is a family-run bulb specialist in Falmouth, Cornwall. It focuses on daffodils, and offers tulip, iris, hyacinth, muscari and crocus.

How has the nursery evolved? Ron Scamp (above, right) founded the business in 1991. A childhood on a flower farm in the Tamar Valley spurred his interest. Travelling the UK with his father and exhibiting at flower shows, Ron amassed a collection of 800 different daffodils when he launched the business; it now offers up to 160 cultivars.

What’s the plan for Master Grower? Scamp’s display will feature daffodils Ron has bred over the past 40 years, plus recent introductions. He says: ‘We’re deeply honoured to be a Master Grower. Our display will feature all 13 classifications of daffodil, including Trumpet, Large-cupped and Double. We will show daffodils that have been crossed with Narcissus species bulbocodium, cyclamineus, jonquilla, poeticus, tazetta and triandrus, and display species of wild daffodil – plus a new daffodil introduced especially for RHS Flower Show Cardiff.’

A collection of photographs will chart elements of nursery life, while the display is expected to comprise up to 160 cultivars.

---

**Mendip Bonsai Studio**

**RHS Malvern Spring Festival (9–12 May)**

What is the nursery’s speciality? Mendip Bonsai Studio is run by John Trett (above), a leading bonsai specialist who offers up to 38 bonsai workshops per year. John holds 88 RHS Gold medals. His nursery at Shepton Mallet in Somerset is open by appointment only.

How has the nursery evolved? John, aged 15, used to pass a house with a Japanese garden while walking his dog. The sight of 40-year-old acers, oriental stone features and ginkgoes ignited his interest in bonsai and he started collecting miniature trees. He says: ‘I joined a club in the 1970s and started giving talks in the 80s.’ In 1996, after redundancy, he turned his hobby into a career with the launch of Mendip Bonsai Studio. John says: ‘I’d had enough of the rat race. Even though I now work more hours, it’s enjoyable and I get a sense of fulfilment.’

John has hundreds of trees spanning up to 1,000 species – including 250 Japanese maple cultivars at his 1.35ha (4 acres) nursery with a polytunnel and three workshops for tree styling.

What’s the plan for Master Grower? The display will feature British-grown bonsai, accent plants and demonstrations. John says, ‘It will show plants from young seedlings to finished trees. Ten people will demonstrate using juniper, cedar, cypress, larch, maples, beech and elm.’ Visitors will see demonstrations of ‘clip and grow’, wiring and potting techniques.

---

**Scamp’s Daffodils**

**RHS Flower Show Cardiff (12–14 April)**

What is the nursery’s speciality? Scamp’s Daffodils is a family-run bulb specialist in Falmouth, Cornwall. It focuses on daffodils, and offers tulip, iris, hyacinth, muscari and crocus.

How has the nursery evolved? Ron Scamp (above, right) founded the business in 1991. A childhood on a flower farm in the Tamar Valley spurred his interest. Travelling the UK with his father and exhibiting at flower shows, Ron amassed a collection of 800 different daffodils when he launched the business; it now offers up to 160 cultivars.

What’s the plan for Master Grower? Scamp’s display will feature daffodils Ron has bred over the past 40 years, plus recent introductions. He says: ‘We’re deeply honoured to be a Master Grower. Our display will feature all 13 classifications of daffodil, including Trumpet, Large-cupped and Double. We will show daffodils that have been crossed with Narcissus species bulbocodium, cyclamineus, jonquilla, poeticus, tazetta and triandrus, and display species of wild daffodil – plus a new daffodil introduced especially for RHS Flower Show Cardiff.’

A collection of photographs will chart elements of nursery life, while the display is expected to comprise up to 160 cultivars.

---

**Mendip Bonsai Studio**

**RHS Malvern Spring Festival (9–12 May)**

What is the nursery’s speciality? Mendip Bonsai Studio is run by John Trett (above), a leading bonsai specialist who offers up to 38 bonsai workshops per year. John holds 88 RHS Gold medals. His nursery at Shepton Mallet in Somerset is open by appointment only.

How has the nursery evolved? John, aged 15, used to pass a house with a Japanese garden while walking his dog. The sight of 40-year-old acers, oriental stone features and ginkgoes ignited his interest in bonsai and he started collecting miniature trees. He says: ‘I joined a club in the 1970s and started giving talks in the 80s.’ In 1996, after redundancy, he turned his hobby into a career with the launch of Mendip Bonsai Studio. John says: ‘I’d had enough of the rat race. Even though I now work more hours, it’s enjoyable and I get a sense of fulfilment.’

John has hundreds of trees spanning up to 1,000 species – including 250 Japanese maple cultivars at his 1.35ha (4 acres) nursery with a polytunnel and three workshops for tree styling.

What’s the plan for Master Grower? The display will feature British-grown bonsai, accent plants and demonstrations. John says, ‘It will show plants from young seedlings to finished trees. Ten people will demonstrate using juniper, cedar, cypress, larch, maples, beech and elm.’ Visitors will see demonstrations of ‘clip and grow’, wiring and potting techniques. 30
Pennard Plants  
**RHS Chatsworth Flower Show (5–9 June)**

**What is the nursery’s speciality?**  
Pennard Plants is based at East Pennard in Somerset. It specialises in heritage and heirloom seeds as well as young edible plants and fruit.

**How has the nursery evolved?**  
Pennard Plants, founded in 2001, is run by Mike Milligan and Chris Smith (above). Mike looks after the seed business while Chris runs the 0.6ha (1½ acre) nursery. Chris ran garden centres in the past, but became frustrated by the lack of focus on plants. ‘So we started a nursery,’ he says, ‘initially selling grasses and herbaceous plants, but my interest was always vegetables.’ Now, Pennard Plants sells 700 seed cultivars, of which 95 percent are heritage or heirloom selections, as well as 500 plant cultivars.

**What’s the plan for Master Grower?**  
An interactive, walk-through display with tomato tasting will highlight the importance of kitchen gardening. Chris says: ‘We’re pleased the RHS recognises that grow-your-own is as important as flowers. We will show a history of our nursery, exhibit heritage and modern cultivars, and launch a blight-resistant tomato called ‘Cocktail Crush’ – a small tomato with excellent flavour.’

---

Downderry Nursery  
**RHS Hampton Court Palace Garden Festival (1–7 July)**

**What is the nursery’s speciality?**  
Downderry Nursery, at Hadlow in Kent, specialises in lavender and rosemary, cultivating plants for garden use and oil production. It offers hardy lavender such as *Lavandula angustifolia* and *L. x intermedia*, as well as frost-hardy, half-hardy and tender lavenders.

**How has the nursery evolved?**  
Co-owner Simon Charlesworth (below) by his own admission had an ‘eclectic mix of jobs’ before becoming a nurseryman. The former bookshop assistant and postman, who has a PhD in land drainage, developed a passion for lavender while helping a friend to set up a nursery. Simon says: ‘I started Downderry Nursery in my garden near Maidstone in 1991 and grew sun-loving plants in a 3 x 2.4m (10 x 8ft) greenhouse, selling by mail order. Everyone went for lavender so that’s what I decided to specialise in.’

A collection of 60 lavenders was granted Plant Heritage National Plant Collection status and in 1997 the nursery moved to Hadlow. It has a 0.5ha (1¼ acre) walled garden plus a 1ha (2½ acre) field, with up to 200,000 plants on site, comprising 80 cultivars. In 2000 a breeding programme was established to create new selections for the garden market and oil production.

**What is the Master Grower plan?**  
Simon says: ‘I’m honoured, privileged and humbled to be an RHS Master Grower. It’s the fruition of 27 years work.’ He explains that rare lavenders and a mix of popular types, plus rows of lavender and field cultivars for oil production, will form the backbone of the display, with a tabletop still running each day to show how oil is obtained. A star rarity will be *Lavandula aristibracteata* from northern Somalia. ‘Its flowerheads look like a vertical squirrel’s tail and foliage scent is a cross between lemon balm, geranium and mint. It’s a cracking plant with a wow factor.’

---

**Resources**  
For more on the Master Growers this year, with links to videos of each on the RHS YouTube page, visit rhs.org.uk/mastergrower