

The Award of Garden Merit review 2012



Mike Grant

The Award of Garden Merit list of recommended plants has just undergone its first review for 10 years. JOHN GRIMSHAW explains the process and reveals how it will be done in the future



FOR OVER 150 YEARS the RHS has given awards to plants exhibited at shows, and continues to do so. The ranks of First Class Certificate, Award of Merit and Preliminary Commendation are rightly valued, but they are awards given to that specimen on that day, as exhibited. Since 1922 the Award of Garden Merit (AGM) has been available to recognize plants for their overall garden performance. By the 1980s, however, it had fallen into disuse, and so was reinvigorated in 1992 to become the Society's premier accolade, granted to plants that show consistent excellence in the garden. 'Plants that Perform' is the current marketing banner being used to promote the AGM, and sums up the concept very well.

RHS trial judges assessing *Sedum* for AGMs

The current review

When the AGM was relaunched in 1992 it was envisaged that there would be a so-called 'sunset review' every 10 years, when the list would be scrutinized and less than excellent plants excluded. Such a review took place in 2002 and has again happened in 2012. Much has changed, however, in 20 years.

So, prior to starting work in 2012, the remit for the AGM was studied by a working group led by Raymond Evison (RHS Horticulture Board), consisting of Jim Gardiner (Director of Horticulture), Kylie Balmain (Head of Horticultural Relations), RHS trials staff, members of RHS plant committees and represent-

atives of the nursery industry. This group confirmed the desirability and value of the AGM, established a crisply redesigned 'trophy' logo (which has already been in use for two years), and critically examined the parameters for the award.

Five criteria for granting an AGM were established (see panel below) and a series of guidelines was formulated to assist in deliberations.

Excellence for ordinary use in appropriate conditions

We made the assumption that the plant is sold with information to make the buyer aware of appropriate growing conditions. For example, a *Rhododendron* may be AGM-worthy on acidic ground, but not on alkaline soil. 'Garden' was defined as any space used for growing plants, enabling houseplants to be included. But an AGM plant must not require highly specialist growing conditions or care.

Assessors of plants are expected to set a particular standard against which each plant is to be judged: if a plant equals or exceeds the standard, it may be recommended for the AGM. There is no limit on the number of plants that may hold the award, but in groups that include many cultivars, standards have to be set especially high if the AGM is to offer helpful guidance to the gardener. This standard should be regularly reviewed; the bar may need to be raised regularly, particularly in plant groups where lots of breeding work is being undertaken.

Available in the trade at some level

The award plant should be available in the UK from nurseries, seed suppliers, specialist growers or garden centres, either through retail outlets or online. Some plants, e.g. alpines, would be of more limited availability than bedding plants: availability needs to be defined appropriately for each plant group. The plant should also be at a reasonable price for its type.

Availability has been the most contentious of the criteria. In the 2002 review an AGM plant was expected to be sold by a minimum of six nurseries (as listed in the *RHS Plant Finder*), but this approach was specifically rejected in the current review. Much has changed in the marketing of plants. The majority of sales take place through garden centres which seldom list their wares in the *RHS Plant Finder*, and there is an increasing internet-based market. It is also quite easy for a nursery to miss the deadline for inclusion in the *RHS Plant Finder* and thus give a false impression of non-availability.

In some cases the merits of new or currently unfamiliar plants are so obvious that an AGM has been granted. This may be before they are widely grown, in the hope that the award will stimulate propagation and distribution. Others, whose qualities need further assessment, have been placed on 'watch lists' for consideration in future years. Sadly, some formerly well-respected AGM



Beatrice Henicot / RHS

RHS trials are one means of AGM assessment. This *Buddleja* cultivar succumbed to *Phytophthora*

plants, such as *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* 'Intertexta', no longer meet the availability criterion and have been removed from the list.

A particular challenge has come to light in the case of annuals, bedding plants and many flowering houseplants. In these categories there is a rapid turnover of cultivars and many are not sold by name at all. For instance, the customer may just be offered 'orange busy lizzie' or 'blue pansy', despite the marketing effort put in by the breeders. A classic case that baffled the Tender Ornamental Plants Committee was florists' *Cyclamen*, where, despite the presence in the market of a large number of named seed-raised cultivars, none are sold under their cultivar names. Apparently the public only want a red- or pink-flowered plant, and that is what they are offered. In consequence, it was decided that, since the public cannot buy such plants true to name, they should not be granted an AGM. The challenge of giving RHS recognition to these ephemeral but significant groups is being considered. ➤

CRITERIA FOR GRANTING AN AWARD OF GARDEN MERIT

- 1 Excellent for ordinary use in appropriate conditions – a cultivar or selection outperforms others, e.g. more flowers, length of flowering, scent, colour, form etc.
- 2 Available to buy – gardeners can obtain material without significant effort, at a reasonable price in reasonable quantity.
- 3 Of good constitution – the material is known to be generally healthy.
- 4 Essentially stable in form and colour – performs according to its description.
- 5 Reasonably resistant to pests and diseases – no significant pest and disease issues which would affect growth and performance.

Of good constitution

This refers to persistence in performance appropriate to the plant type. Stock should generally be healthy in the trade and cultivars which have declined over the years should be considered for deletion.

Also, the plant must not require highly specialist care or treatment.

Essentially stable in form and colour

Adherence to characteristics for which the plant was selected, such as floriferousness, is essential. Cultivars should be stable in form and colour and known to be stable over an appropriate period of time, dependent on genus. This is particularly relevant for variegated plants.

Fundamental to the AGM criteria is the concept of consistency. A person buying an AGM plant must be assured that it really will perform to expectation. One of the weak points in the system is the granting of an AGM to a species with no further distinction, effectively suggesting that the AGM pertains to all representatives of that species. This is undesirable, as the natural variation inherent in wild species can result in wildly varying performance. In consequence, we are trying to give the AGM to named cultivars rather than just 'the species', to guarantee consistent performance.

This is not as easy as it sounds: there are many species whose garden performance as a whole is of AGM standard, even when raised from seed – *Acacia dealbata*, *Cyclamen hederifolium* and *Papaver commutatum* 'Ladybird' for example, but in others there is too much variation. The situation with *Helleborus x hybridus*, although not a natural species, is a classic example. While few would argue that the Lenten rose is a superb garden plant, most are aware that seedlings, even from good



Carol Sheppard / RHS



Mike Steigh / RHS



Berry Phillips / RHS

Various species have had their AGMs withdrawn because of inherent variability. They have been replaced by more reliable cultivars of those same species, such as (clockwise, from top left) *Cotinus coggryia* 'Young Lady', *Betula albosinensis* 'Red Panda' and *Rhus typhina* 'Radiance' ('Sinrus')

parents, vary greatly. As most specimens of it are raised from seed the inherent uncertainty as to their qualities makes it impossible to award an AGM in this group. Perhaps the increasing availability of tissue-cultured clones with consistent characteristics will permit it in the future, if they meet the other requirements.

Examples of where we have been able to remove the AGM from the species but apply it to cultivars include *Betula albosinensis* 'China Ruby' and 'Red Panda', *Cotinus coggryia* 'Young Lady' and *Rhus typhina* 'Radiance' ('Sinrus') and Tiger Eyes ('Baltiger').

The situation is also complicated by the fact that many plants sold by nurseries under a species name are in fact clonal representatives of their species (and probably should have a cultivar name). In such cases the plant supplied to a customer is going to be consistent to its clonal attributes and it can be safely given the AGM, such as *Phyllostachys aurea*. An example of a common clone that has been named and given the AGM is *Sorbus thibetica* 'John Mitchell'. It is to be hoped that in the ongoing assessment of plants the number of species with the AGM will diminish in favour of named clones representing them more reliably.



Melody Wesley / RNS



Carol Sheppard / RNS



Mark Bolton / RNS



Carol Sheppard / RNS

Herbaceous plants that have received AGMs in the latest review include (clockwise, from top left) *Aconitum* 'Stainless Steel', *Paeonia* 'Coral Charm', *Eucomis comosa* 'Sparkling Burgundy' and *Phlomis tuberosa* 'Amazone'

Reasonably resistant to pests and diseases

The award plant must exceed or meet the standard of natural resistance for that genus or species. For example, potatoes should have some resistance to blight and *Monarda* should have mildew resistance. Any pest or disease treatments, where necessary, need to be available to amateur gardeners. However, at the time of award, acknowledgement of susceptibility to known diseases should be stated.

The susceptibility of plants to disease, especially in the current turbulent times for new plant

pathogens, is a major reason for their exclusion. In the deliberations of the Woody Plant Committee we have excluded all *Fraxinus* in the face of the probable serious epidemic of *Chalara* just over the horizon. Additionally, a number of otherwise good *Pinus*, such as *P. nigra* and *P. sylvestris*, have had to be excluded on account of their susceptibility to *Dothistroma* needle blight.

Other factors

A further criterion for exclusion from the AGM list is plants deemed invasive in wild habitats by Defra, and which it is illegal to plant in such a way that they could establish in the

wild. Many of these were never going to be AGM plants and the undesirability of some, such as *Impatiens glandulifera* and *Hydrocotyle ranunculoides*, is self-evident. On the other hand, there will be many who regret the absence of *Rosa rugosa*, *Cotoneaster horizontalis* and other *Cotoneaster* from the list, but all can be damaging to wild habitats.

Another area of difficulty is where good plants have become muddled in the trade, with perhaps two or more clones being sold under the same name. Should the AGM be denied to the original, if it is the best, because of this? In the case of *Chaenomeles x superba* 'Knap Hill Scarlet' the Woody Plant Committee felt that the situation in the trade was so muddled that the AGM should be withdrawn from plants with this name. However, in the case of *Photinia x fraseri* 'Red Robin', although there is evidence that some mislabelling occurs, the original is still the predominant clone supplied and still worthy of the AGM.

Also, in this review, tender orchids have been granted AGMs. They were excluded following the 2002 review because availability and correct naming were insufficient. However, the situation has now improved, especially in availability, and 35 now have the AGM. ➤

The AGM assessment process

Plants are granted the AGM by two routes: recommendation and trials. In both cases the names brought forward must be submitted to the relevant committee for ratification by a majority vote (having been previously voted on by those who made the selections). Most plants with the AGM have achieved that status by common consent, having proved themselves to be worthy over many years in many gardens, and this core changes only slightly from review to review. They can be said to be the backbone around which our gardens are planted.

In the 2012 review the AGM list has been scrutinized by each of the plant committees, or a subcommittee thereof. Each worked within its remit to exclude plants deemed unworthy of the AGM, those that are no longer available, and to debate recommendations for new awards.

Precisely how this has been done has depended on the committee. In most cases small groups of members with particular expertise were asked to review a range of genera before bringing their recommendations back to the committee for discussion and ratification. In areas where the committee's expertise was wanting, outside input has been sought. For example, the Woody Plant Committee is short of rosarians, so David Clark, who was asked to lead the review of roses, worked closely with the Royal National Rose Society and other enthusiasts to develop the new list, a model example of collaboration. They met for a series of meetings through 2012, delaying the final meeting to enable a final assessment of reblooming cultivars. The result is a robust list of 321 roses with AGMs (see panel, right).

For vegetables, however, where the AGM is granted only after trial,

the sunset review consisted principally of checking the availability of selections that hold the AGM. It was found that of around 1,000 AGM vegetables, about 400 were no longer available, so these have been deleted from the list. Ongoing trials will ensure the list is kept up to date.

The other route to the AGM is through RHS trials. The most frequent location for this has been RHS Garden Wisley, although RHS trials are conducted at other gardens around the country. These trials are visited at regular intervals – sometimes every few days at the peak of the season – by a panel of judges and each entry is assessed. At the end of the trial the results are analysed and recommendations for awards or deletions are made.

RHS trials are an expensive and labour-intensive activity involving large numbers of RHS staff and volunteer judges, but the result is an objective assessment of the qualities of that particular group of plants. Inevitably, the nature of trials means that comparatively few can be carried out each year, so it is not possible to conduct frequent reviews in this way for any particular genus, even though the turnover of cultivars in many genera is remarkably rapid.

A notable example of a genus where a new trial is urgently required is *Echinacea*. A trial that concluded in 2003 looked only at *E. purpurea* and a few other species, granting 4 AGMs, of which two have been rescinded in the current review. That trial just missed the boom in interest in *Echinacea*. A similar situation has



Heuchera 'Smoky Rose' is no longer available

occurred with *Heuchera* and its relatives which were last trialed in 2001 – several cultivars that performed well, such as *Heuchera* 'Smoky Rose' which is no longer readily available, have been edged out by new introductions. Both groups are popular, and commonly purchased by the public, even if some cultivars do not survive in the garden for as long as one might expect. However, no recent, objective assessment for the AGM has been done on them. There is much to be said, at least in genera such as these, for a more flexible approach to trialling. New introductions could be compared against a benchmark of tried and tested AGM-worthy cultivars, enabling the AGM list to be kept current and informative.

Although a huge number of people, from the nursery trade, specialist societies and National Plant Collections, as well as the RHS, have devoted a great deal of time to the 2012 AGM review, not all groups of plants have made it through the mill. One notable exception is *Lilium*, for which a review will be undertaken in 2013. Aquatic plants are another under-represented class with, for example, a wonderful diversity of recent *Nymphaea* cultivars not yet recognized by the AGM.

ROSE AGM FIGURES

Rose names in RHS Database:	11,013
Commercially available 2011–12:	1,765
AGMs from 2002:	237
Deleted AGMs:	68
New AGMs 2012:	152
Total AGMs for roses 2012:	321



Mike Grant

RHS trials, such as this current one of herbaceous *Phlox*, will yield new AGMs on a rolling basis

Hardiness ratings

It cannot be expected that all plants will grow in all places. One of the major determinants of appropriate growing conditions is a plant's hardiness, and a hardiness rating produced by the RHS has long been used in conjunction with the AGM to provide a simple indication of appropriate conditions for the plant.

Until 2012 a scale of ratings H1 (tender) to H4 (hardy) was used, but this has been superseded by an expanded scale, H1–H7, that gives a broader and more robust assessment of a plant's hardiness. The new definitions can be seen by searching for 'Hardiness' at: www.rhs.org.uk

The advantage of the new system is that it relates to plant tolerances, not broad, geographic, climatic sweeps like the commonly used USDA hardiness zones. As before, an indication of hardiness will be given alongside the AGM symbol, at least in relevant RHS publications. These new ratings have had to be decided upon during the review process, in itself a considerable amount of work.

Changes to come

The most significant change to the AGM procedure is that it will now be a rolling process. There will be continuous evaluation, rather than the monumental and exhausting

decennial reviews such as we have just done. The new procedure for recommendations for additions or rescindments is that they can be brought to committee for an annual AGM debate, and anyone can submit suggestions. Additions will come into force once ratified, but there will be a lag period of a year for deletions, enabling retail catalogues to remain accurate for their lifespan and allow the using-up of stocks of printed labels. Awards arising from trials are unaffected. Notification of new awards and deletions will be made on the RHS website.

Committees will also have responsibility for monitoring the existing AGMs for viability, and undertaking such reviews as are necessary to maintain the AGM list in good shape. The advantage of this system is that it will mean that there is no backlog of selections to be deleted, as in the case of vegetables this time, and that new introductions that prove worthy can quickly receive recognition. Clearly, the rigour of the criteria must be adhered to, and popularity must not be allowed to obscure genuine worth, but this will make the AGM more responsive to the changing retail availability of plants.

A concern about the AGM, raised especially by plantspeople and specialist nurseries, is that it selects a

tiny fraction of the available diversity of garden plants and promotes them heavily. They perceive there is a danger that AGM plants will dominate the nursery trade and oust other cultivars from production. In some cases this might be a good thing, knocking dull plants out of the picture, and indeed (apologies to Plant Heritage!) there is little point in anyone, commercial or amateur, growing superseded, second-rate plants. The ideal is that the AGM list should inform the choice of a solid core of reliable plants around which diversity can flourish. Fortunately, most gardeners like diversity and are always looking for different things to try. As a quick look at the *RHS Plant Finder* will demonstrate, the choice of plants available is vastly more diverse than the AGM list.

Conclusion

The 2012 review of the AGM has been a collaborative effort by a large number of people. They have given a huge amount of time to bring their expertise together and help the RHS in one of its primary aims, the promotion of good horticulture – the Society is extremely grateful to them all.

It is ironic that, despite all this effort, at the time of writing it is not possible to say precisely how many AGMs will be on the new list published in February 2013: discussions and debates are going on up to the last minute. It is likely, however, to be in the region of 7,100. This will give plenty of choice from which to make a splendid garden of 'plants that perform'.

JOHN GRIMSHAW is Coordinator of the 2012 AGM Review and AGM Review Leader for the RHS Woody Plant Committee