



The deep magenta of *Geranium Patricia* ('Bremprat') needs careful matching of paint

# Painting hardy geraniums

Why is painting cultivars important, and how is botanical art composed and executed?  
LAURA SILBURN explains

All photographs by Laura Silburn

**B**OTANICAL ART is a balance between art and science. It ranges from the technical documentation of a species to something that exists simply to be beautiful in its own right. An artist must decide where on this scale their work will fit, considering what information needs conveying and to whom. For me, the very best work in botanical art encompasses both ends of this wide range.

Each project comes with its own purpose: for example, a commission, a wildflower project, or work for a

florilegium archive. One of my interests is growing and collecting cultivars of hardy *Geranium*. This led me to select them as a subject of study in order to exhibit paintings at an RHS botanical art show staged in 2013.

In this article I hope to convey the process of producing such paintings, in the hope that it will be of interest to artists and horticulturists. I also hope it lays bare some of the challenges associated with depicting cultivars as opposed to species.

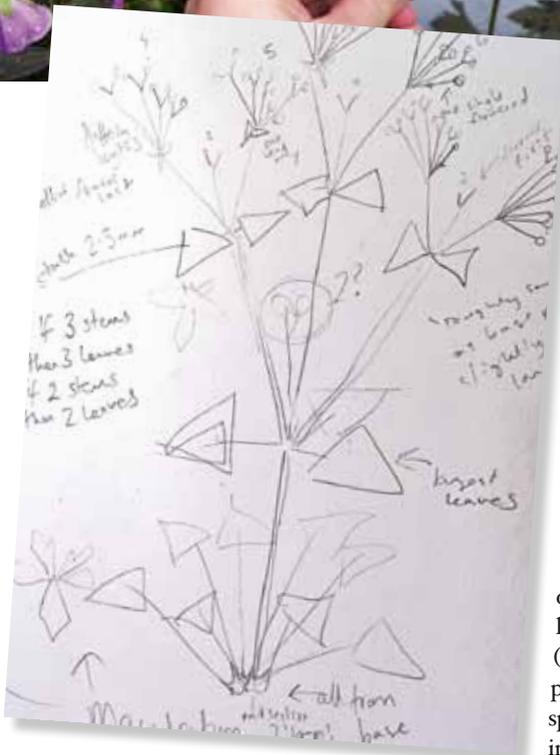
## Why record cultivars?

Our best cultivars are popular and important but what is grown under those names can change, or they can be lost completely over time. For example, in 1940, *Geranium pratense* 'Mrs Kendall Clark' was described as 'pearl grey flushed with softest rose' (Bath & Jones 1994). Yet in a 1976 trial the RHS (2014) described it as 'Violet Blue Group 91A with white veining', which clearly is a different plant. Mislabelling does not help: I have seen *G. x magnificentum* sold as *G. himalayense*, *G. x oxonianum* sold as *G. Patricia* ('Bremprat') and many different plants as *G. 'Johnson's Blue'*. Accuracy is further lost.

The current appreciation of 'heritage' cultivars of fruit and vegetables demonstrates our interest



Observing the natural habit of *G. maculatum* 'Elizabeth Ann' (top) so that stem arrangement can be sketched (left). Rough composition sketches (right) also inform how the final painting will look.



these subjects deserved to be recorded in a way that would both capture their botanical attributes and portray their value in horticulture.

Many representations of geraniums depict them loosely, in a freer style (e.g. Cameron 2003), perhaps to reflect the sprawling habit of some in the genus. Technical botanical illustrations, on the other hand, document the species, such as in Yeo (2001), focusing on detail and not the 'character' of a plant. My challenge was to produce work which would record each cultivar but also convey the aesthetic character of the plant and perhaps inspire growers to place them in their own borders.

### Choosing geraniums

There are roughly 70 species and 700 cultivars of *Geranium* in gardens in the UK (Hardy Plant Society

2014). Although many cultivars are derived from the most popular species, there is more diversity in the genus than many are aware of. I hoped to promote the genus to those who were unfamiliar with its wide range. Cultivars with the RHS Award of Garden Merit (AGM) in particular offer something that is tried and tested and proved to be excellent and reliable. These would provide a shortlist of the best plants currently available on the market.

As I was only planning to exhibit six paintings I had to choose that many from the 47 AGM cultivars, which was a tough task. Plants needed to be compatible as a set of paintings but also contrast for interest. The size of plant and flower, habit and leaf colour were important factors. Rock garden species would not sit well with larger ones and those with a prostrate habit would not fit with tall ones. Yet I wanted to showcase diversity. I therefore chose mid-size plants with a wide range of leaf and flower colour. They also flowered at different times of ▶

in preserving our past, but we must not overlook what is current and make sure it too is properly recorded. Botanical illustrations can precisely depict plants, including their true colour, which photographs cannot. They also add value to dried specimens, written descriptions and photographs, such as those maintained by the RHS Herbarium at Wisley. I wanted to make a record of these cultivars as an accurate reference point, complementary to botanical description. I felt that



Stages include a mock up of the composition for *Geranium x oxonianum* 'Wageningen' (top), initial drawings for *G. phaeum* 'Our Pat' (above left) and painting *G. clarkei* 'Kashmir White' from life (above right).

the year, from spring through to late autumn. This not only highlighted the long season which can be achieved with geraniums but allowed me longer to spend working on each when it was in flower. I chose plants from a variety of geographical regions and spread my choice of species between the different classification groups outlined by Yeo (2001). My final choice was *Geranium* Blue Sunrise ('Blogold'), *G. clarkei* 'Kashmir White', *G. maculatum* 'Elizabeth Ann', *G. x oxonianum* 'Wageningen', *G. Patricia* ('Brempat') and *G. phaeum* 'Our Pat'.

Some plants I was particularly

keen to use were not easily available. I ordered these by mail from reputable nurseries, usually ones that specialised in geraniums, to ensure the right plant was obtained. I also needed a good understanding of how a healthy plant would grow in perfect conditions. Where I was not convinced that my own plants reflected this I visited gardens where the plants grew well and compared them. The RHS plant trial descriptions (RHS 2014) were invaluable in checking that the sizes and colours of my plants matched how they had been recorded by the RHS. The RHS Colour Chart notes

in the trial descriptions were used to double-check that I had recorded flower colour correctly, especially when continuing a painting after a plant had finished flowering.

### Observing the plants

Using two different techniques I found I could record two very different, but equally important, sets of information. The first technique was to observe the plant and make diagrams of how it grew. This included measurements of parts such as basal leaves, flowering-stem leaves, flower parts, hairs and internodes. I closely inspected and compared plants to understand factors such as shoot suppression, flowering order, how many flowers were open at a time, and how appearance changed over the season.

The second technique was to sketch the plants and do preliminary paintings. This was to get a 'feel' for the plants and the painting techniques I would use to best represent them. I used looser painting and drawing techniques to do this, with aesthetic appeal strongly the focus in these latter exercises.

I considered what should be shown and what should be left out. For example, I decided not to show mature fruits, the 'crane's bills'. These are fascinating but cultivars are overwhelmingly grown for their flowers and reproduced vegetatively, not by seed.

### Planning the compositions

Sketchbook and actual-size compositions, using pencil and layout paper, were created using the diagrams and sketches together. A background in drawing, especially life-drawing, helps bring life to subjects that might otherwise seem clinical if drawn technically. These compositions were repeatedly changed and redrawn and went through many



*Geranium Patricia* ('Brempat')

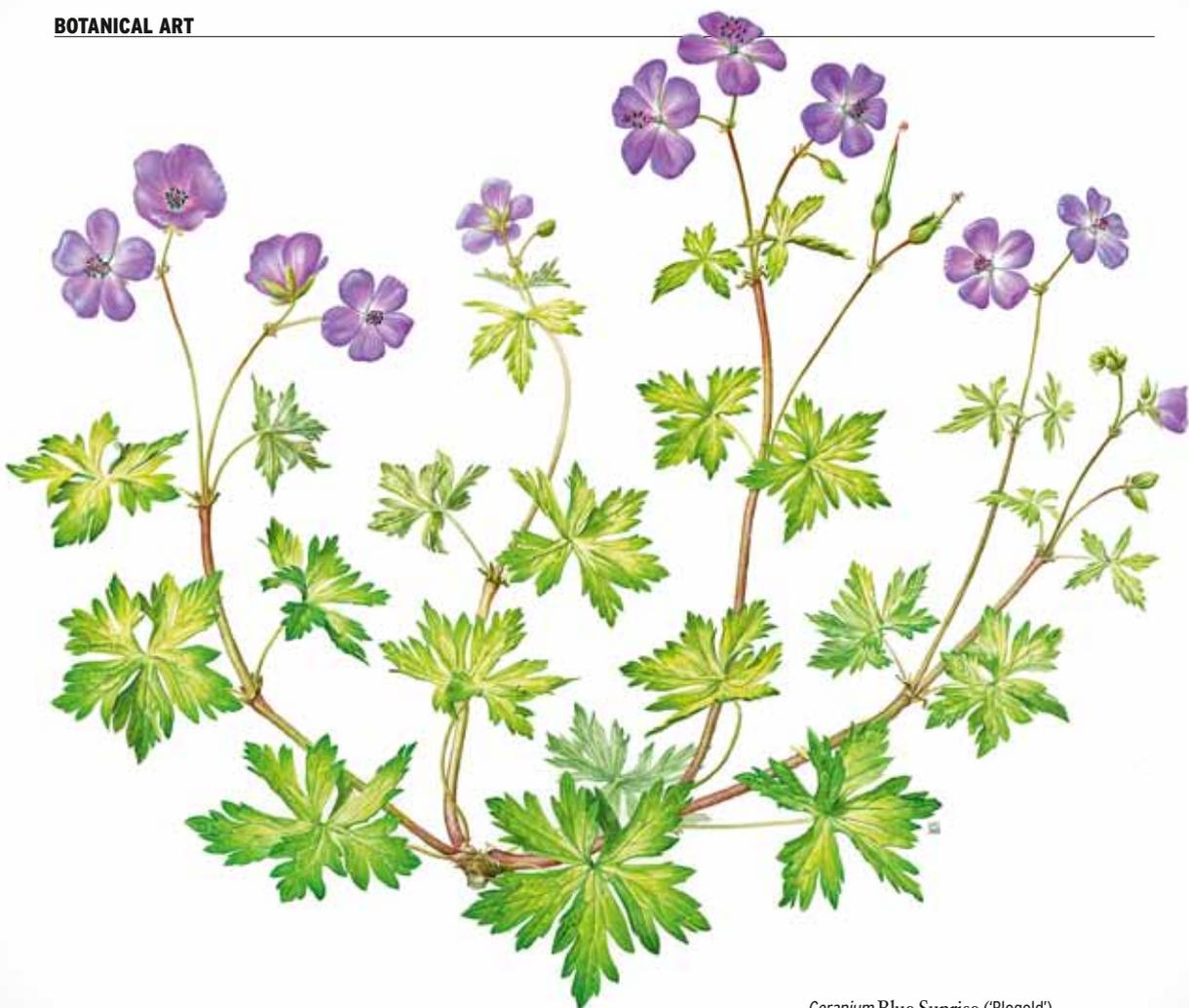
stages before a basic layout for each painting was settled upon.

There were major conflicts between showing all the necessary parts of a plant and having a pleasing composition. I had to rebalance the compositions constantly and try many different 'poses' to obtain the best aesthetic effect. All the time I was checking and rechecking that

everything was included, as it was very easy to stray from the recorded information. The process felt very much like a balancing act between the art and the science.

Once an embryonic composition was decided upon I started accurately drawing in detail and taking good quality photographs of the plant parts I would need. I had

decided upon the angles I wanted to show and could pose plant material to suit. Many drawings were done and then assembled, rather than working on one drawing of one whole plant. Once I had enough material I could put the compositions together almost like collages. I found it useful to do colour mock-ups and then photograph and compare ➤



*Geranium Blue Sunrise* ('Blogold')

them. Viewing two-dimensional images on screen helped me spot potential mistakes in compositions. These might not show on a drawing but would be glaring once on the wall.

### Working in paint

Next I needed to colour-match the plants in paint. This was very time-consuming, with the velvety blue-purple of *G. phaeum* 'Our Pat' and the brightmagenta of *G. Patricia* ('Brempat') being particularly difficult to match. My preference was to start with a base colour as near to the end result as possible, rather than mix from a limited palette, as it broadened my range and

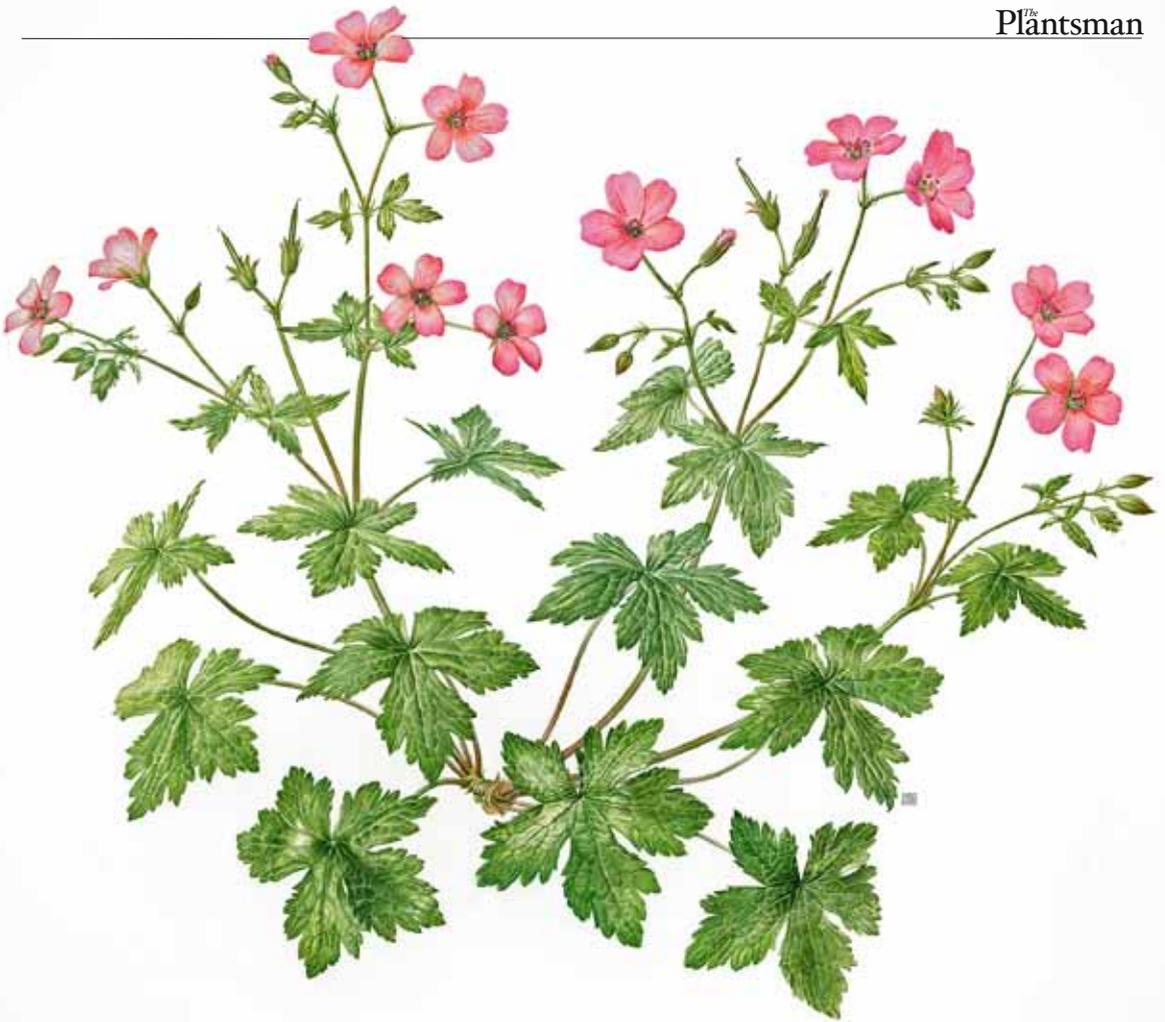
was quicker and more reliable. Colour mixing was a repetitive process of trial and error with so many variable combinations of mixes and washes. I found that photographs very rarely provide colour with any accuracy at all, and could not be relied upon in any way.

Once the final paintings had been started I endeavoured to paint as much as possible while each plant was in flower, with fresh plant material to refer to. I alternated paintings according to what was in flower. I made sure that at least some flowers, sepals and stamens from each plant were recorded while the plant was in season. Once the

plants had died back I could refer to the parts I had already painted, as well as my research material, sketches and photographs. As I had done so much preparation the painting stage was, to a certain extent, a matter of execution. At every stage, however, I was learning more about the plants so the paintings inevitably evolved with the process.

### Finishing the project

When the paintings were finished I photographed them with different sized mounts and frames. This helped visualise how they would appear once finished. I decided on



*Geranium x oxonianum* 'Wageningen'

slim mounts and frames as space at the RHS show was limited. Time spent on working out how the pieces would be displayed was definitely worth taking. Framing was expensive but displayed my work at its best.

The work was completed over two years and culminated in my exhibiting at the RHS London Orchid and Botanical Art Show in 2013. My collection of six paintings received a gold medal, the top award.

#### Further work

Having been immersed in cultivars for so long I was glad to finally move on to something completely different: I am currently working

towards an exhibit of paintings of *Aristolochia* species, mostly tropical, for an RHS show in October 2014. Yet I know I shall revisit *Geranium*, especially as I have yet to put brush to paper to record those fascinating 'crane's bill' fruits.

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Her *Aristolochia* paintings will be at the RHS London Shades of Autumn Show on 21–22 October 2014

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the RHS Dawn Jolliffe Botanical Art Bursary for funding the framing of my paintings.

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