



Celebrating Plant Finder

First published in 1987 to help people obtain plants, *RHS Plant Finder* has become an indispensable publication for all gardeners

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When Chris Philip and his partner Denys Gueroult moved to Whitbourne in Worcestershire in 1984, they could scarcely have guessed that their attempts to stock their new garden would have a profound and lasting effect on gardeners throughout Britain.

Because he and Denys experienced difficulties obtaining marvellous plants they read about in gardening literature of the time, Chris thought that many gardeners must have similar problems and would like help.

In 1985 he started to collect plant catalogues, entering every cultivar available onto a database to create a directory. Denys had the job of proofreading printouts, correcting names and standardising spelling. This was when they found their first and biggest problem: there were many different names – up to 15 – for what appeared to be the same plant.

Importance of naming

Respected reference sources did not always agree which name was the most correct. By listing every one, the directory would be impossibly large, cumbersome and expensive. Any finished version had to list only the most correct name, with cross-references for important synonyms – but which plant name was the most correct?

The couple joined the Hardy Plant Society (HPS) in 1986. Chris offered the society half of the book's profits in return for HPS endorsement of the publication, which he called *Plant Finder*. Was the HPS able to help with naming problems Denys had been unable to resolve? The society's then Chairman, Jack Elliott, knew that in my work as a National Trust Gardens Adviser I specialised in checking plant names, so he introduced Chris to me at an RHS London Flower Show at Vincent Square in 1986.

My involvement created a huge amount of work for



The first edition of *Plant Finder* from 1987 (above left) does not include the year on its cover – it was envisaged as a one-off. The 20th anniversary edition (above centre) came out April 2007; this annual book is still published in April, but since 2013 has only shown one year on the cover. The latest, 30th anniversary edition (above right) will be available next month (see p76).

Chris. I provided a list of 450 nurseries I had compiled. These and the plants each offered were duly added to the database. I also convinced Chris each name had to be recorded in full and styled according to the codes of nomenclature. To Chris's eternal credit, he went to a great deal of trouble to make sure each name was as accurate as possible and that all cross-references matched. By November 1986, the first printouts of plant names were sent to me to correct – a huge task. Finally, in late March 1987, the book was sent to the printers.

The first edition listed 22,000 plants – it lacked, for instance, roses and bulbs – but it was well received, encouraging Chris to think about a second edition. Other countries followed suit with their own versions, most adopting the naming conventions used in *Plant Finder*.

With later editions, more sorts of plants and more cross-references were added, along with classifications for the likes of *Dahlia*, *Dianthus* and *Narcissus*. By the third edition there were 40,000 entries, reaching a plateau of 70,000 in 1997. This number has changed little, as new entries have more or less equalled the number of deletions.

The RHS acquired the copyright of the publication >>

RHS Plant Finder: some favourite plants of experts



David Millais

Millais Nurseries, Surrey

RHS Plant Finder is a wonderful resource for anyone looking for specialist plants, especially the more obscure, and for those gems spotted in gardens open to the public.

Rhododendron (Loderi Group) 'Loderi Sir Edmund'

There are quite a few different clones of Loderi Group rhododendrons, and all are good with tall, scented trusses of flowers in early May, pink in bud and turning blush white after a few days. They are not the hardiest of rhododendrons, with an RHS hardiness rating of H4 (–10 to –5°C / 14 to 23°F), but are well worth growing in sheltered woodland gardens. Nothing can compare to seeing the magnificence of these tall plants in full flower. Bred at Leonardslee Gardens in West Sussex by Sir Edmund Loder about 100 years ago, *R. (Loderi Group) 'Loderi Sir Edmund'* is one of the strongest-growing clones, reaching 2m (6½ft) in 10 years before developing into a magnificent, tree-like woodland specimen.



GAP / TOMMY TONBERG



Laura Crowe

Wildegooose Nursery, Shropshire

If we need to check we have the correct name for a plant, or can't remember the species, we always pick up RHS Plant Finder, knowing that it is an accurate and reliable source of information.

Viola 'Eastgrove Blue Scented'

Of the many violas we grow, this has to be one of the best of all – a truly hardy perennial cultivar which forms large, vigorous clumps at the front of a border and is smothered in medium-sized, deliciously scented, mid-blue flowers.



GAP



Peter Cox

Glendoick Gardens, Perthshire

RHS Plant Finder is so useful for seeing if a rare plant is available anywhere; it is also valuable to us for advertising what plants we have for sale.

Magnolia 'Star Wars'

I first saw this excellent tree in Tasmania and took to it at once. We have grown it for 15 years and it is a real winner, flowering well every year. It is vigorous but forms a well-shaped, upright specimen with masses of large pink flowers – often in autumn as well as spring.



GAP / JONATHAN NEED



Edward Cannon

Langthorns Plantery, Essex

Seldom does a day go by when I do not delve into RHS Plant Finder to check names, RHS Awards of Garden Merit, Plant Breeders' Rights or to locate plants both for my customers and myself.

Zanthoxylum americanum

I came across this plant while working as Head Gardener at West Wrattling Park in Cambridgeshire in 1995. I have it planted at Langthorns as both a specimen tree and a hedge, and sell seed-raised plants in a range of different sizes.

This really is a plant for all seasons. It has strongly aromatic leaves and seedcases that are said to have many medicinal qualities. It makes an unusual and beautiful specimen tree with its gnarled, knobby trunk and branches and huge, spectacular thorns. The attractive green leaves, which look rather like those of ash (*Fraxinus*), turn fiery yellows and oranges in autumn while the striking red seedcases ripen and split to reveal shiny black seeds. Hardy to at least H5 (–15 to –10°C / 5 to 14°F) and tolerant of a wide range of soils, it makes an excellent, impenetrable hedge.



GAP / GEOFF WIDD



Adam Frost

Adam Frost Design, Cambridgeshire

In my work as a garden designer, I frequently use the RHS Plant Finder to check the spelling and full Latin names of plants that I include in my designs.

Paeonia 'Buckeye Belle'

Great, deep red, loud and blowsy flowers are this peony's main attraction; they never last long enough, but plenty appear.



RHS / JASON INGRAM

RHS Plant Finder

in time for production of the 8th edition in 1994; in 1995, the title changed to *RHS Plant Finder*. From 1997 to 2011, compilers worked with publisher Dorling Kindersley, since when it has been published by the RHS. The Society had set up the Advisory Panel on Nomenclature and Taxonomy in 1995, largely to deal with problems arising from *Plant Finder*. Rebranded as the Nomenclature and Taxonomy Advisory Group, the panel is now chaired by John Grimshaw and is a force for stability within plant naming, never foisting dubious or contentious name changes upon gardeners until a clear consensus of what is most correct has been achieved.

RHS Plant Finder today

The growth of the internet has made some nurseries feel they do not need to appear in *RHS Plant Finder*. Ease of searching a plant name or accessing *RHS Plant Finder* online has also affected sales of the printed version, but many gardeners like to have a paper directory – whether to use as a list of ingredients for their garden or to accompany them in the car on holidays or nursery visits. For garden designers, gardening journalists and authors, it is indispensable – especially new editions that can be scoured for novelties and evidence of the latest trends.

I can always think of plants I would like to see in *RHS Plant Finder*, but it is not easy to persuade nurseries to list them if they are scarce or available only periodically. Other important plants – for instance pot plants, bedding plants and those raised from seed (perhaps accounting for 90 percent of all plant sales) – are still poorly represented. Many such plants are sold by garden centres and supermarkets for just a few weeks in summer. Every year I note the most thrilling new introductions of these plants I'd love to grow – if I could find them. A select few turn up at RHS Chelsea Flower Show and are mentioned in the horticultural press or the occasional blog, but there is otherwise a deafening silence, which is a great injustice.

Providing a lasting legacy

The most obvious effect of the publication of *RHS Plant Finder* is that it has become easier to find the plant you want. Fads, such as galanthophilia, sweep the country, leaving propagators gasping to keep up. The evidence of such trends can be seen in successive editions. Other

RHS Plant Finder 2017

To be published in April, the 30th anniversary edition, *RHS Plant Finder 2017*, contains additional articles in a special colour section. This includes a longer version of the history of *Plant Finder* by Tony Lord, as well as contributions from plantspeople, nursery owners and renowned gardeners. As well as explaining the importance of the book to nurseries, there is an exploration of the links between published plant names, RHS Plant Trials and the RHS Award of Garden Merit (AGM).

- ❖ *RHS Plant Finder 2017*, Royal Horticultural Society, April 2017, ISBN 9781907057779. RRP £14.99, **RHS price £12.99.**
- ❖ To order a copy in advance, call **01483 211320** or visit **www.rhsshop.co.uk**



countries have quickly acquired (doubtless with the help of *RHS Plant Finder*) the same plants we grow here, resulting in the internationalisation of the world's garden flora. Wherever you travel, gardens in climates akin to ours have similar plants. Gone are the days when certain parts of the UK were noted for certain genera, although I rather miss spending a few days rootling around Devon nurseries for rare cultivars of double primroses or sweet violets. This sameness is a curse that can diminish the pleasure we get from gardens and garden visiting, but *RHS Plant Finder* can also be used to find local cultivars, thereby reversing this trend.

Before I met him, I remember Chris's offer of *Plant Finder* funding being discussed by the HPS Executive Committee. There were questions. Who was he? Was he mad? Could he deliver? It was plantsman Graham Rice who pointed out none of this mattered: the HPS had nothing to lose and should accept with grateful thanks. It is interesting, 30 years on, to speculate whether *RHS Plant Finder* would exist without Chris. I doubt it. His vision, tempered by determination and realism, and ably assisted by Denys Gueroult, came at just the right time to produce a publication of lasting worth.

So, what of the future? I hope *RHS Plant Finder* will thrive for many more decades, yet none of us should take it for granted. It relies on all of us to keep buying it and to support the nurseries it lists. If your copy is a few years old, why not treat yourself to the new edition? You might be surprised how much the British garden flora has changed since your last purchase. ●

