



# RHS Plant Trials and Assessments

*Perovskia*

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# RHS Trial of *Perovskia* 1999–2001

## *Perovskia*

*Perovskia* is a genus of sub-shrubby, deciduous perennials with greyish-green leaves. They are grown for their hazy panicles of small violet-blue flowers borne on greyish-white stems in mid to late summer. These stems persist into the winter and form a desirable feature in their own right. All parts of the plant are aromatic, hence the common name of Russian sage, but *Perovskia* are not edible.

They associate particularly well with other grey-leaved plants such as lavender or, for contrast, can be undersown with orange- or red-flowered annuals such as poppies. They also look good with herbaceous perennials such as *Helenium* and clump-forming grasses. They are suited to prairie-style planting schemes and gravel gardens as long as they are not encroached on by larger plants

## Botany

The genus *Perovskia* belongs to the *Lamiaceae* (mint family) and is closely related to *Salvia*. There are thought to be seven species and they are widely distributed over arid regions of Asia. The erect stems bear egg-shaped to oblong, greyish-green leaves that are either shallowly toothed or, in some species and cultivars, attractively divided into narrow lobes giving a lacy appearance. The tubular, two-lipped flowers are borne in interrupted whorls on tall, branched panicles. The flower size is very similar in all perovskias, typically 0.7–1.2cm long. Most have violet-blue flowers,

only two have a different flower colour – *P. scabiosifolia* has yellow flowers and *P. scrophulariifolia* f. *albiflora* has white flowers. Some botanical sources state that individual plants can have the style either exerted from the flower or included within it – all plants seen in cultivation have exerted styles.

The violet-blue flower colour is remarkably constant across the range of species and cultivars, most can only be distinguished by degree of leaf dissection and ultimate height. It is not clear whether the majority of cultivars are variants of *P. atriplicifolia* or hybrids between *P. abrotanoides* and *P. atriplicifolia*. The cultivars are much more widely grown than the species and, of the latter, only *P. atriplicifolia* is usually encountered. The other species need high summer temperatures to thrive.

## Cultivation

Perovskias prefer a site in full sun and will thrive in most soils as long as it is well-drained. If the skeletal white stems are cut back to a woody, basal framework about 15cm high in March, the new foliage will reach a height of about 30cm by early June. The main flowering period is mid-July to mid-August when the taller-growing species and cultivars will reach an ultimate height of 1–1.4m.

Propagation is by softwood cuttings taken in late spring or shoot cuttings taken with a heel in summer.



Cover: 'Blue Spire' (photo: Mike Sleigh)

Above: *Perovskia* trial at Wisley (photo: Mike Sleigh)

Right: *Perovskia abrotanoides* growing wild in eastern China. (photo: Martin Walsh)

Opposite: 'Blue Spire' (photo: Mike Grant)





## RHS Trial of *Perovskia* 1999–2001

The RHS Woody Plant Trials Subcommittee decided in 1998 that a small trial of currently available *Perovskia* would be of benefit, primarily to sort out the correct identity of individual cultivars, especially 'Blue Spire'.

## Award of Garden Merit

'Blue Spire'	AGM (H4) 1993 reconfirmed
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### Objectives:

- To determine correct nomenclature
- To highlight *Perovskia* as being useful late-flowering shrubs
- To assess for the Award of Garden Merit
- To make a permanent record through herbarium specimens, photographs and written descriptions for the RHS Herbarium at Wisley.

### Entries

Three plants each of the 11 entries (six of which were 'Blue Spire') were submitted by Gardens and nurserymen from UK, Europe and Canada.

### Cultivation

The entries were planted on 10 May 1999. All plants were stooled in March 2000.

### Judging

The trial was judged and assessed by the Woody Plant Trials Subcommittee from July 1999 to 2001.

### Findings

The plants grew well and all survived in a trial site in Wisley village, which had a late spring frost in 1999 and was then flooded in November 2000. The Bavarian nursery, Staudengärtnerei Gräfin von Zeppelin, noted that their entry of *P.* 'Hybrida' (sent as *P.* × *superba*) was completely hardy.

One entry of 'Blue Spire' had been grown from seed, and all three plants entered in the trial were different. This highlighted the common practice of raising named cultivars from seed and selling them under the cultivar name, and underlined the need for named cultivars to be propagated by an appropriate means for them to remain true.

*P. atriplicifolia* was sent to the trial, but was not considered to be correct. The closest to the species being *P. atriplicifolia* 'Mystery of Knightshayes'. *P. abrotanoides* was sent but not considered correct, the closest to it being 'Filigran'. Of the six entries of 'Blue Spire', four were considered correct.

# Selection guide



*P. abrotanoides* (photo Martin Walsh)

*P. atriplicifolia* \*

*P. atriplicifolia* 'Little Spire'  
(photo Mike Grant)

*P. atriplicifolia* 'Mystery of Knightshayes'  
(photo Mike Grant)

## ***P. abrotanoides*\***

This species grows to a height of 1.2m and is distinguished by its bipinnate leaves with linear lobes. The flowers are violet-blue. Native to a region stretching from Iran to Tibet.

## ***P. atriplicifolia*\***

This species grows to a height of 1.2m and is distinguished by its leaves that are sharply toothed or deeply incised. The flowers are violet-blue. Native to Afghanistan, Pakistan and W. Himalaya.

## ***P. atriplicifolia* 'Little Spire'**\*

This is a lower-growing variant of the species only reaching 0.6m in height but with the usual violet-blue flowers. Selected in Holland in 1995 by Herbert Oudshoorn.

## ***P. atriplicifolia* 'Mystery of Knightshayes'**

Distinguished from the species and other cultivars by its relatively narrow habit, shallowly toothed, larger leaves and its flowering period peaks about 2 weeks later. It grows to a height of 1.1-1.2m and a width of 60cm. Named in 1989 by American horticultural writer Allan M. Armitage for a distinctive plant he saw growing on a dry stone wall at Knightshayes Court, Devon.

## ***P.* 'Blue Haze'**\*

A cultivar with shallowly toothed leaves, selected by Alan Bloom and first shown to the RHS in 1964.

## ***P.* 'Blue Mist'**\*

Reputed to flower earlier than 'Blue Spire'.



*P.* 'Blue Spire' (photo Mike Sleight)

*P.* 'Filigran' (photo Mike Grant)

*P.* 'Hybrida' (photo Mike Grant)

*P.* 'Lace' (photo Mike Grant)

### *P.* 'Blue Spire' 🌸

This cultivar has a good upright habit to a height of 1.1-1.2m and a width of 0.8m. The leaves are deeply incised and the flowers are violet-blue. Originally obtained from Germany by Notcutts Nurseries, Suffolk, who named it and first exhibited it to the RHS in 1961.

### *P.* 'Filigran'

This cultivar grows to a height of 1.2-1.3m and is distinguished by its finely cut, ferny, grey-green foliage. The flowers are violet-blue. It was selected in Germany by Ernst Pagels, filigran is German for filigree.

### *P.* 'Hybrida'

(syn. *P.* 'Superba')

Very similar to 'Blue Spire' but slightly taller and wider in habit, this cultivar grows to a height of 1.2-1.3m a width of 1.1m. Selected at Hillier Nurseries, Hampshire before 1937. The later name 'Superba' was given by Giesenheim Research Institute, Germany, in 1955.

### *P.* 'Lace'

This cultivar has similar but more dissected foliage than 'Filigran' but the leaves are greener and it is more squat in habit, growing to a height of 0.8-0.9m and a width of 0.7m. The flowers are violet-blue. It was selected by Tony Huber of Norseco Inc in Quebec, Canada, in the 1990s.

### *P.* 'Longin'\*

Reputed to have barely dissected foliage.

### *P. scrophulariifolia*\*

This species has a more sprawling habit than the above two and generally reaches a height of 0.6m. The ovate leaves have a scalloped, wavy margin. The flowers are usually violet-blue. Native to Turkestan.

\* Not in RHS trial.

## **Senders of plants to the trial**

Arne Herbs, Limeburn Hill, Chew Magna, BS40 8QW  
Blooms of Bressingham, Diss, Norfolk IP22 2AB  
Firma C. Esveld, Rijnveld 72, NL 2771 XS, Boskoop, The Netherlands  
Green Farm Plants, no longer trading  
Hillier Nurseries Ltd, Ampfield, Hampshire SP51 9PA  
Knightshayes Garden Trust, Knightshayes, Tiverton, Devon EX16 7RG  
Liss Forest Nursery Ltd, Greatham, Liss, Hampshire, GU33 6HA  
Norseco Inc, Chomedey, Laval, Quebec, Canada H7P 5R9  
www.norseco.com  
Notcutts Nurseries, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 4AF  
www.notcutts.co.uk  
Perryhill Nurseries, Hartfield, East Sussex TN7 4JP  
Gräfin von Zeppelin, D-79295 Sulzburg-Laufen, GERMANY  
www.graefin-v-zeppelin.com

## **The Royal Horticultural Society**

The RHS is the UK's leading gardening charity dedicated to advancing horticulture and promoting good gardening. Its charitable work includes providing expert advice and information, advancing horticulture, training the next generation of gardeners, helping school children learn about plants, and conducting research into plants, pests and environmental issues affecting gardeners. The RHS AGM plant trial scheme is an important part of this work.

The RHS receives no government grants and for every pound received from members' subscriptions we need to raise more than twice as much again to fund our charitable work. We also rely on donations and sponsorship to supplement income from our garden operations, flower shows, shops and plant centres.

## **RHS Plant Trials**

With so many different types of gardener and so many different cultivars available to them in each group of plants, it is important that a system of recommendation is in place to help with selection at point of sale. These recommendations must be clear and reliable to ensure that of the thousands of plants available in the UK, a proportion are identified as excellent garden plants. The RHS provides this information through its extensive programme of plant trials held at RHS gardens in the UK. The RHS Award of Garden Merit (AGM) indicates which cultivars are best for general garden use.

RHS plant trials serve the professional gardener who wants to know the range of plants available, including the latest breeding and selection programmes, with their distinctive characteristics and provenance. They also serve the amateur who wants to know which plants will grow and perform well in a particular garden situation.

The RHS has an unrivalled resource of knowledge and expertise and is therefore best placed to conduct plant trials for the UK gardening market.

## **RHS Herbarium (WSY)**

The RHS Herbarium is the largest and most active of a small number in the world dedicated to horticultural plants. The collection has c. 70,000 specimens, c. 35,000 photographic images and 3,500 paintings. It is both a useful and valuable archive that is used daily by RHS botanists and outside researchers. Material collected from the RHS Gardens, Shows and Trials, is dried, pressed and catalogued.

The RHS herbarium is an invaluable repository of preserved specimens, illustrations and historical data concerning ornamental plants for today and for the future.

## **RHS Bulletins**

*Begonia* Rex Cultorum Group: December 2006  
*Canna*: September 2003  
Daisies (yellow perennial): September 2004  
*Delphinium*: June 2004  
*Fuchsia* (hardy): December 2005  
*Geranium* (hardy) Stage 1: June 2005  
*Geranium* (hardy) Stage 2: June 2006  
*Geranium* (hardy) Stage 3: June 2007  
*Hyacinthaceae* (little blue bulbs): September 2005  
*Iris* (bearded): May 2007  
Lavenders (hardy): July 2003  
*Miscanthus*: October 2004  
Peppers (sweet): November 2006  
Potatoes (salad): November 2004  
*Potentilla* (shrubby): July 2002  
*Rhododendron yakushimanum* and hybrids: May 2006  
Runner Beans: October 2007  
Saxifrages (silver): May 2005  
*Sedum* (herbaceous): November 2007  
*Spiraea japonica* (with coloured leaves): November 2003

## **RHS Plant Trials and Assessments**

Online publications, to complement  
*RHS Plant Trials and Awards* series

*Pittosporum tenuifolium* hybrids and cultivars: July 2006  
*Caryopteris*: December 2007

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