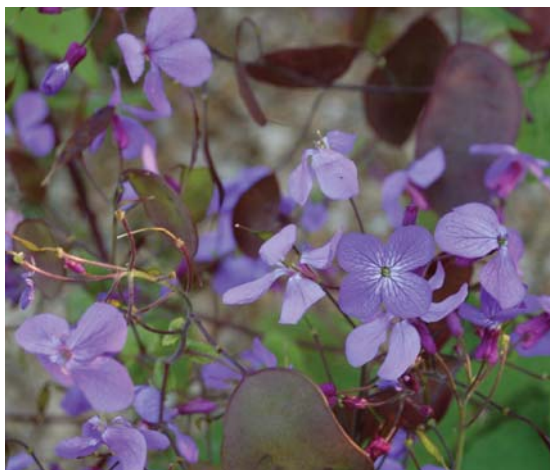


The lure of the new

Derry Watkins

A plant is not necessarily any better because it is new. But it is necessarily more interesting. To me at least. I am irresistibly drawn to any plant, or at least any flower, I have never seen before. Maybe this will be the best, most adaptable, most beautiful plant anyone has ever grown. But not very likely. Of all the thousands of 'new' plants I have ever tried to grow, perhaps one or two have stuck around and entered general cultivation.

On my first plant-hunting trip to South Africa, I spent three months collecting plants and seeds. On my way home I left my clothes behind and just filled my luggage with plants. Thirty kilos and over a hundred species. All legal, carefully washed off and dutifully taken to be inspected for pests and diseases. Armed with a phytosanitary certificate, I sailed through customs and thought I had brought a whole armoury of new plants into cultivation. Far from it. At least a third of them never made it through their first winter. Going from spring in South Africa to November in Wiltshire was not their idea of fun. One by one they keeled over despite (or perhaps because of) my attempts to coddle them. Spring finally came to Wiltshire and the remaining ones began to grow. Some just grew too big, or became ungainly in this new climate. Some refused to flower, or flowered for only 2 days a year. Some just lost their charm and I fell out of love and kicked them out.



Lunaria annua **'Corfu Blue'**

Someone sent me seed of a blue *Lunaria* from Corfu and someone else sent the same thing from Paxos. It had a particularly nice blue-purple colour and, astonishingly, it refused to die. It flowers, sets seed and appears to die, then shoots again from the base, turning itself into a perennial which can then bloom at all sorts of times of year. It has become the most popular seed I sell.

Many were not hardy, but I was prepared for that. I am happy to overwinter young plants in the greenhouse if they promise to burst into glory when summer comes. But many beautiful foliage plants just were not worth the greenhouse space for me. You might have chosen differently. I will go to any lengths for a plant I am in love with, and not very far at all for plants which are just attractive. Perhaps I should have called this article *Love Conquers All*.

By the end of the first summer I was still in love with perhaps a dozen of them. After five years, one was available at garden centres (since disappeared, and because they never told me they were going to drop it, no longer in cultivation). One had become the grandmother of a long line of other plants, the source of all white diascias. One had taken centre stage in my garden where it proved hardy for twelve years and then died, having given me ample pleasure. A few others had found their way to loving homes, but not into general commerce. Rather an eye opener to me. I was not changing the face of horticulture, but just indulging in my own passion for the new, the different, the untried.

Which is all right. I now go plant-hunting for my own pleasure. A week or two of dedicated searching in some exotic spot. I adore it, but my husband calls it an “anti-holiday” and won’t come along. I concentrate very hard and walk very slowly, to see plants growing in the wild, as they were meant to be, in their natural habitat. And I collect a few bits and pieces to play with. Plants growing in the wild can be spectacular, Texas bluebonnets from horizon to horizon or one *Gloriosa* lily dangling out of a tree, but sometimes they grow even better in my own garden, where the gentle English climate keeps them in bloom for months longer than they would at home.



Cosmos peucedanifolius

James Compton brought me a tuber of a perennial pink *Cosmos* he had discovered in Mexico. He had assumed it was tender, but when he dug them up from his garden he accidentally left some tubers outside all winter, and discovered they were remarkably hardy. It's very good value in the garden but looks terrible in a pot, so it will never get into a garden centre. If I could get more seed than I do, it would be popular from seed.

It is illegal to collect plants from the wild in many countries. It is also inconvenient. Plants are bulky, have to be looked after carefully and brought home quickly. Seed is far more convenient. It takes no space and lasts for years if dry. But the trouble with collecting seed is you rarely know what you are collecting. I am not a botanist. I might recognise the plant family of this seedhead, but I am unlikely to be able to identify the species until I have brought it home and grown it and it's flowered. Sometimes they take years to identify. An umbel I collected in Spain 10 years ago still has not been identified. A tame botanist is a very useful friend. Even better if you can take them collecting with you so they can (possibly) identify the plants as you collect the seed.

The search for new plants turns out to be a very bonding experience. People who are keen on plants are drawn to each other like magnets. Once they realise you are really interested they cannot do enough to help. I have made lifelong friends all over the world through our shared passion.

Plant hunting is not just for exotic locations. I never go anywhere at all without looking out for new plants. What is on that roundabout? What is in that office window? Why is that flower a different colour? I may intend to pay attention to buildings or paintings or mountains, but my eye is always drawn towards what is growing. Normally just recognising and patting it on the head for being there. But if I don't recognise it, I want a bit to take home and nurture. Can I make it grow in Wiltshire if I find it growing in Ethiopia or California or Manchester?

What makes a plant new for me is simply not having grown it before. I don't know what everyone else has grown, so I may well bring back plants that are already in



***Digitalis purpurea* 'Pam's Choice'**

Pam Roberts worked in a nursery in Oregon. They were throwing out a 'flat' (a tray of seedlings) of mixed *Digitalis* which were starving, and trying to flower in the tray. She rescued them, and on her way home, Ernie and Marietta O'Byrne from Northwest Garden Nursery spotted a particularly nice flower in her car, white with purple spots. They asked for the plant, collected seed from it and the next year sowed it in their garden, removing all other *Digitalis* so there was nothing for it to cross with. It turned out to be extraordinarily strong-growing, reaching 2m. A few years later they introduced it to the trade as 'Pam's Choice'. They gave me some seed which I brought back to introduce in the UK. Now, ten years later, it is quite widely available as either seed or plants.

cultivation. That's OK by me. I get the pleasure of discovering that plant whether or not everyone else already has.

And of course I am addicted to visiting nurseries. They have their eyes open too. Maybe they have found something I have never seen before. Or a new form of an old friend. I never come away empty handed. I sometimes think the only reason I run a nursery is to justify all the plants I just have to buy and try to grow.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the most fertile sources for really garden-worthy new plants turn out not to be unexplored mountains, but nurseries in other countries. So trips to Europe and the US have yielded some real gems. Still no guarantee they will grow and thrive here, but a lot more likely than the random wildings from Nepal, Chile, South Africa or Morocco. Not so much because of climatic differences, I think, as because they have shown themselves adaptable to cultivation. Ease of propagation, tolerance of root disturbance when being potted on, tolerance of different soil types, different watering regimes and, above all, a long blooming period are what's needed to make a successful new plant. On the other hand, a plant which is wonderful in one place is not necessarily wonderful in another. Our summers are not hot enough to bring out the best in many American plants, and their summers are too hot for many of ours. The plants survive but don't thrive or don't bloom for long.

And now that people know I am always interested in something new, my customers bring me plants they think I might not have. So seeds and plants find their way to me. Also occasionally something new pops up under my nose, an accidental seedling which I didn't weed out.

I am not the only one drawn to the new. In my nursery I find the word 'New' sells plants like no other. Not sensible perhaps, but curiosity kills a lot of cats. Gardening is



Rehmannia elata
'White Dragon'

I saw this growing in a nursery in California. Just one massive pot of it. I begged a few pieces to bring home and failed to make them grow. A few years later I went back and begged some more because I thought it was very beautiful. I managed to grow it this time, but over the years I struggled to keep it alive and eventually gave up. It did not have the will to live.



***Dicentra* 'the original Stuart Boothman'
aka 'Filigree'**

I found this unusual *Dicentra* in a friend's garden. She had bought it as *Dicentra* 'Stuart Boothman', but I had been selling 'Stuart Boothman' for years and it had nothing like the fine, purple-flushed foliage of this one. I decided to call it 'Filigree', but a year later I saw it growing at Wildside. Keith Wiley called it 'Stuart Boothman', but explained that the form in commerce had morphed over the years as nurserymen propagated it from seed or divided plants that had seeded into themselves. My 'Filigree' turned out to be the original 'Stuart Boothman' after all. I have never seen it sold anywhere else, but it could be hiding in any good nursery as just plain old 'Stuart Boothman'.

a learning experience. No one ever knows everything, and the most fascinating bits are the bits you are just discovering, whatever is at the periphery of the known. After forty years of gardening my boundaries have expanded exponentially so I am fascinated by more and more plants, not fewer and fewer as I thought I would be when I had learned about all the important ones. I still love many old favourites but I am no longer fascinated by them, no longer drawn across the garden to see how they are doing today. It is the new ones that pull me.

I don't have the facilities to grow new plants on in different conditions for several years, so my customers help me trial them. We all learn together and share information. My plants come with no guarantee other than that I find them interesting. Sometimes customers come back to me raving about plants I have given up on, and I give them a second try if they will let me have a piece back. But more often the lure of the new is pulling us towards the ones we have never seen before.

I am sure it would be more sensible to concentrate on growing better the plants I already have, but I am constantly distracted by curiosity, and the possibility that this one will be the best plant ever. I know I am chasing a will-o'-the-wisp, but no matter how often I fail, I just can't seem to give it up. 🌱

Derry Watkins, an American, has been gardening in the UK for 40 years and running Special Plants Nursery for 25. In 1993 she won a Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship to spend three months in South Africa looking for new plants to introduce into horticulture; in 1995 she returned to collect seed in the Drakensberg. Author of *The Complete Greenhouse Book* and *Sunspaces*, Derry also teaches at The English Gardening School.