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Fig. 1 Of the five *Cotinus* selections that made it to the short list, it was ultimately *C.* 'Candy Floss' in the foreground and *C.* 'Ruby Glow' at the back that made it through to final release.

## In pursuit of new plants – the driving force behind Hillier Nurseries

Kevin Hobbs

One hundred and fifty years and counting: Hillier Nurseries' dedication to great garden and landscape plants and trees is as strong as ever!

As a Director of Hillier Nurseries I am extremely proud to be part of a family business that still holds true to its founding principle of supplying a wide range of fantastic plants to the gardening public and horticultural industry throughout the UK and beyond.

Of course the world is a very different place from when Hillier was founded in 1864, but at least one fact remains: the demand for something new or unusual, a demand that both excites and drives us forward.

*The Hillier Manual of Trees and Shrubs*, so often referred to as 'the woody-plant bible', is testament

to the passion and commitment of the Hillier family and staff both past and present. Turn to the back pages of this treasured reference and you will find plants listed that have been bred, selected, raised and/or named by Hillier Nurseries from *Primula sinensis* 'Annie Hillier' in 1875 to *Cotinus* 'Candy Floss' and *C.* 'Ruby Glow' in 2014 (fig. 1).

Behind this comparatively short list sit 152 years of plants first grown and commercialised by Hillier through their work with many plant hunters and growers, amateur and professional, all round the world.

A great example of such a plant is the handsome conifer *Metasequoia*, a monotypic genus discovered in a central Chinese village by a Mr T Kan in 1941. A media fanfare ensued, heralding the living

relic of a fossil thought to be extinct for 5 million years! Hillier Nurseries were the first to offer commercially in Britain *Metasequoia glyptostroboides*, described in their 1949 catalogue as 'seedlings that have grown with surprising vigour'. Over the years Hillier have both developed and attracted a whole host of talented propagators and growers,



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Fig. 2 Eric Smith c. 1947.



Fig. 3 Pete Dummer worked with a wide range of hybridisation subjects, pictured here with one of his *Leycesteria* selections.

many of whom have had a gift for hybridisation or, at the very least, a keen eye for seedling variation or plant mutation. There are too many to cover in one article, but here are some examples of great plantsmen and of plants they bred.

Eric Smith (1917–1986) (fig. 2) worked for Hillier in the main herbaceous and alpine nursery in the 1950s to mid-1960s. Described as a very private and shy man, Eric enjoyed experimenting with hybridisation at which he proved very successful. One of his most enduring creations is *Hosta* 'Halcyon'. However, it is his work with hellebores that is particularly benefiting us today, 30 years after his death. He worked

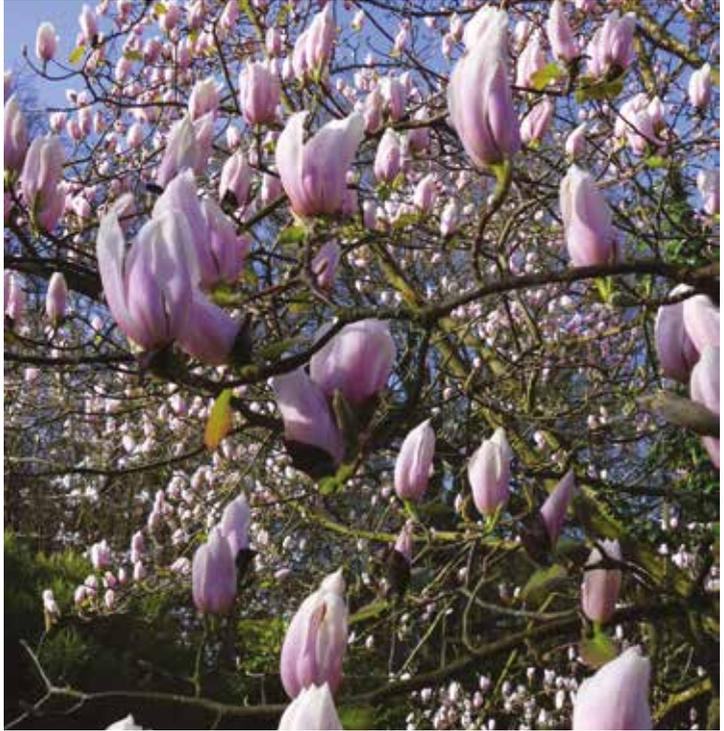


Fig. 4 *Magnolia* Dummer Hybrid Pink, as yet unnamed.

with crosses involving *Helleborus torquatus* and *H. x hybridus* and those between *Helleborus niger* and *H. x sternii*, creating what we now know as *H. x ericsmithii*, a hardy and robust evergreen with white, green-flushed, outward facing flowers. Enjoyed from the start by specialist nurseries and plant collecting gardeners, its real impact is only to be seen now. Further breeding by Hillier and other nurseries such as Heuger in Germany have resulted in new cultivars which are now successfully propagated in tissue culture labs. So, at last, every gardener has access to Eric's legacy.

As a Hillier apprentice

in the mid-1980s, I have fond memories of Peter Dummer (fig. 3), a real character with a mischievous grin and a unique eye for plants. Considered a nipper amongst the 'old boys', my enthusiasm, constant questions and badgering paid off. Pete often beckoned me to join him and carry the ladder on some of his many forays into the neighbouring Hillier Arboretum for his latest hybridisation subjects, notable of which was his work on magnolias. I recall being both amused and rather sad at a casual statement he made one sunny May afternoon: "Nipper, I will be long

gone before anyone sees the results of my *Magnolia* crosses". Sure enough, I remembered those words while enjoying two of his unnamed hybrids flowering at the nearby Fromefield Nursery long after Pete had passed away (fig. 4). Amongst Pete's many introductions it is surely *Cotinus* 'Grace' that best represents his legacy, grown all over the temperate regions of the world.

Today we continue this great work in the Hillier Research and Development department, located in our nursery not far from Winchester. It's a grand title for what is a modest but very important part of our enterprise, led by Sir Harold Hillier's grandson, Richard Clifton. Richard and Hillier alike have the advantage of a propagator and plantsman who trained under and worked with the great names of the recent past, Alan Postill (fig. 5).

The mention of Alan's surname immediately brings to mind *Daphne bhuloa* 'Jacqueline Postill', arguably the best of the larger garden daphnes. Now in his 53<sup>rd</sup> year with Hillier, Alan has bred numerous new plants over the years, both woody and herbaceous perennials including the *Cotinus* launched in 2014, the popular *Choisya x dewitteana* 'Aztec Gold' in 2012, and *Digitalis purpurea* 'Serendipity' (fig. 7) in 2008.



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Fig. 5 Alan Postill with his hybrid *Choisya x dewitteana* 'Aztec Gold'.



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Fig. 6 *Digitalis purpurea* 'Saltwood Summer'.



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Fig. 7 *Digitalis purpurea* 'Serendipity'. Using *D. purpurea* 'Saltwood Summer' as a parent, Alan Postill worked wonders to produce *D. p.* 'Serendipity', now our top-selling foxglove.



Fig. 8 Mikinori Ogisu and Kevin planthunting on Mt Ena, Japan.

Together Richard and Alan run the R&D department, focusing on the propagation and growing of plants considered difficult, albeit very desirable, such as daphnes, romneyas and edgeworthias, as well as propagating plants collected and sourced all over the world from seed and cutting material sent or collected by botanic gardens, plant collectors and explorers (fig. 8) – chief amongst whom are Roy Lancaster and John Hillier. Up to a quarter of the work carried out on this department should be considered purely of botanical interest, the results of which

are available to the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens and botanical collections all over the world – work Sir Harold believed in and a legacy I am dedicated to preserve.

With modern communications the world seems much smaller, and today Hillier bring to the market so many new plants introduced by us on behalf of international amateur breeders and professionals alike. A most satisfying part of my job is helping small growers or breeders bring their new plants to market. With our experience we can apply for Plant Breeder's Rights, multiply

young plant material and ultimately launch the plant internationally. We get a great new exclusive plant to market to UK garden centres and they enjoy stress-free royalty income: everyone's happy!

Our trial criteria for a new plant are extensive. Beginning in the R&D department, after a satisfactory result from a small test batch we go on to trial in a garden setting. Meanwhile a sample plant in a pot will be viewed by a consumer panel. Market data confirms a fact I am sure most will agree with: it is the lady gardeners who spend the most on ornamental plants. Therefore, we have a panel of ladies who soon identify the most desirable of our potential new plants.

We continue with commercial trials on our main production site, while images are taken in garden settings ready for picture labels and other marketing materials. Depending on the new plant's season of interest, we decide on a launch date and venue – the ideal scenario is Chelsea Flower Show.

The whole trial period to launch can take from as little as 18 months to many years, our objective to launch only strong, reliable, garden-worthy plants.

On the subject of plant breeder's rights, I feel it is perfectly reasonable to protect a plant that has often taken a number of



Fig. 9 *Glycyrrhiza uralensis*, Chinese liquorice, was just one of many wonderful plants grown by Hillier for Piet Oudolf's Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park design.

years to breed and select. For example, Alan carried out breeding of *Cotinus* in the late 1990s, we grew on the seedlings and selected five favourites in around 2003, the five clones were tested in the garden and in pots and our final selection was made in 2008 with the launch of *Cotinus* 'Candy Floss' and *C. 'Ruby Glow'* in 2014. Over 15 years in the making!

We have so many great new plants in the pipeline, from incredible lysimachias, eryngiums, and *Mahonia eurybracteata* with rich golden foliage, to a pure-white-flowered *Crinodendron hookerianum*! New doesn't mean better, however, and you will

often find us offering older varieties that we consider to be better than some of the new equivalents.

As well as plants, we focus on the cultivation of people. Solid knowledge of plants and the principles of plant physiology, along with growing skills, are currently in short supply.

We have a great team of growers both young and old, and with careful succession planning they both receive and deliver regular training. No knowledge is assumed or taken for granted.

Countless horticultural students have been trained, supported and inspired through our partnership with the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens. It is great fun meeting and working with them, sharing a passion for plants and introducing them to new contacts and opportunities. Many have stayed in contact and have gone on to develop great careers and fed back yet more news of wonderful plants.

Our annual production for the UK garden-centre market is now in excess of two million plants, made up of over a thousand different lines. A broad range is important, as many of our



Fig. 10 *Sporobolus heterolepis*, North American Prairie Dropseed, a curious grass with a sweet, almost soap-like scent in mid to late summer. Also grown for the Olympic Park.

friendliness and, of course, the all-important price point; all these factors also have to match seasonal footfall.

These are just some of the criteria which then must be considered for international markets.

Based in California, our partner Plant Haven does a fantastic job of marketing, promoting and managing the Hillier-bred plants around the world. They now collect royalties for Hillier and other clients on more than 25 million plants a year, the biggest market North America. Such a partnership is essential to maximise distribution and demand, and it is exciting for us to see our plants enjoyed by gardeners worldwide.

As I write I look to the future with fond memories of the past, one of which always makes me smile. As a young apprentice I had

customers use us as a one-stop shop for hardy garden shrubs and herbaceous perennials. However, it is the new and unique plants that provide the strongest growth at home and overseas.

Our breeding and selection criteria include ease of production and transportation, retail impulse, shelf life, fashionable colours and features, wildlife

It is an individual plant's performance in both the garden and landscape that dictates success in the marketplace. The customer is looking for low maintenance, drought and flood tolerance, hardiness, pest and disease resistance, situation adaptability and longevity, along with looking good all year round – not much to ask for!



Fig. 11 *Indigofera himalayensis* 'Silk Road'. A top garden performer for mid to late spring, selected and introduced by Hillier in 2006



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Fig. 12 *Teucrium ackermannii*, a rare species in cultivation, worthy of a greater garden presence.



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Fig. 13 *Euonymus myrianthus*. Kevin's favourite *Euonymus* fruit, very showy with its orange-yellow hue.

noticed Pete Dummer's eagle eye for any plant out of the ordinary. So I got ahead of him in the Hillier Arboretum and removed some flowers

from a pink weigela and carefully arranged them in the foliage of a forsythia. Sure enough, and from a great distance, Pete focused

on this curious anomaly and on closer inspection he realised he had been duped by the cheeky apprentice – I won't repeat the curses! 🌿



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Fig. 14 Kevin with Piet Oudolf in his garden, Hummelo, The Netherlands.

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