



Choosing the best plants

Bob Brown

I now realise why so many of the phlox I grow are such rubbish. I thought it was me – my neglect, my poor cultivation or, at least, my unsuitable growing conditions. We all tend to blame ourselves when plants don't do well, but the reason is often that the plant has a poor constitution or is disease-prone. I know this because there was a trial of *Phlox* at Wisley. I was a judge and saw weakly growing plants that mimicked the slow death of the same cultivars in our nursery. I also saw how some varieties combat disease well, how clean and well-coloured the foliage can be, and how much impact good flowers can have.

How are we, confronted with a stand of phlox (or anything else) at a horticultural show, a nursery or a garden centre, to choose the best? Our problem is that there are too many kinds of plant to choose from, so

we choose the one which will be the bluest (or have the bluest colour-enhanced picture-label) or the one that's the right height for where it's going. If the plants are in flower, we are easily misled by the perfect flowers on a compact plant that has been sprayed with dwarfing compound, fungicides and insecticides, raised in controlled environments and delivered to the garden centre yesterday. But, will it thrive and give a repeat performance in successive years, or die in the bag on the way home?

If you can find an expert, he or she will have an opinion which will go some way to helping with your purchase, but the RHS Award of Garden Merit (AGM) is a guiding light. It's the result of impeccable trialling, completely independent of any commercial interests. As a result, we can choose the best – something that

has the constitution to live, has the best shape, glorious flowers, the best berries or whatever it is that the plant is normally grown for.

Bear in mind that plants which have an AGM still need to be grown in appropriate conditions so, for example, an AGM meconopsis is unlikely to come up to AGM standards if you grow it in Essex. The AGM means that you have a whole gamut of experts at your elbow. It represents their combined opinions about plants grown in the sort of real conditions that are likely to be found in your garden. Phlox are wonderful. Surely your jaw has dropped in autumn at the sight of a late variety in full bloom and you might have reacted to its perfume by breathing more deeply. You might also have gazed at your own motley lot and decided to never grow them again. Use the AGM to get it right.

Trials are initiated by the relevant RHS Committee. For me it's the Herbaceous Plant Committee. Each is peopled by experts with practical experience. Maybe a group of its members have listened to their colleagues, recognised the current popularity of, say, the carrot family (Apiaceae, formerly Umbelliferae) and realised that the gardening public needs some guidance about which kinds are the best, then proposed a trial. Such proposals are submitted to the RHS Trials Office and a slot allocated for the trial. In the past all trials took place at Wisley, but provincial gardeners, especially the Scots, justifiably moaned about the appropriateness of awards given in such a benign location. Thus, in 2010 trials began to take place across the country. The first, for *Meconopsis*, were at Harlow Carr, Wisley, Rosemoor and Holehird. In this case Wisley should be considered the least

benign location. In 2019 a trial of *Hemerocallis* will begin at Floors Castle in Roxburghshire and Sissinghurst Castle in Kent. The same plants are tested at each site, plants which have been very carefully selected from the tens of thousands of cultivars available to be most appropriate for British conditions. In 2019 a trial of *Echinacea* to see which ones survive through the winter will finish. This trial is international: Wisley, England; Boskoop, the Netherlands; and Wroclaw, Poland. The notion is that fewer echinaceas will die in the colder winters in the East. Arranging for trials at such diverse places falls to individuals on the Herbaceous Plant Committee but is managed by the Trials Office at Wisley.

Submitting a Trial Proposal is therefore complicated and often lengthy. Subsequently the management of the trial must be considered. The

foremost decision is who is best qualified to make up the forum to judge the trial. This is important because the judges will need to be consulted about questions such as how long should the trial last; who will record the comments and judgements not only at the end of the trial but for the entirety of its duration; should the plants be staked; is weed best controlled by applying a mulch or will a mulch encourage dormant crowns to rot; should the plants be deadheaded; how many of each kind should be planted; what about watering; who will write the report at the end of the trial; and so on. Timetables for allocating and preparing the ground, for acquiring plants and planting them need to be set, ideally in consultation with the forum of judges. The process is not simple, but the result should be of inestimable value across Britain and probably the rest of the temperate world.



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The judging takes place over the entire season of garden effect. So, for Herbaceous *Paeonia* (a trial due to finish in 2019), judging, focused on the flowers, starts in late April and ends in early June, but then resumes in autumn to judge for autumn colour. The judging criteria will have been set by the judging forum. For instance, things that can let a peony cultivar down are: relative paucity of flower; flowers that are too heavy so fall and become muddled; susceptibility to peony wilt, *Botrytis paeoniae*; poor foliage;

and a short season of flower in what's already a fleeting season. These criteria will be considered when awarding points for vigour, good foliage, overall appearance, etc.

However, even the AGM system has a problem. Not everything has been, or will be, trialled. Some plants are not well enough known or widely enough grown to be trialled. Or they might have been bred or introduced since the last trial took place. To combat this defect, the RHS has introduced a more interactive system whereby, in consultation with experts

and the RHS Committees themselves, the awards can be modified between trials. Then there are the constraints of money and time which limit the trials operation. So bear in mind that if your potential purchase has not got an AGM this is not necessarily a criticism of it.

I shall root out the poor phlox in my patch. (If they need to be maintained in cultivation the Plant Heritage Collection Holders can do it.) I will replace them with the ones that I know will grow and perform well because they have AGMs. 🌸

Bob Brown has been growing, describing, comparing and assessing plants for the last 30 years. He gives a best score of 10/10 but that's only his opinion. The award of an AGM draws on far wider experience.