



Review of our 2011 season

This month we reflect on our season as it draws to a close; the highlights, lowlights and overall feel of the year...

Nursery sales and mail order

For the first time our combined nursery and mail order sales exceeded any individual show on our calendar. Our plant Heritage Collection has reached new proportions and so many varieties we hold are never seen at the shows. Visitors to our nursery are able to access many of these rarely offered plants. Over winter, we intend to start work on a 2 acre display garden, so there will always be something new to see.

The shows

This year the number of shows we attended did not increase, but our commitment to them did, with additional displays staged as part of the Plant Heritage features at Gardeners World Live, Hampton Court and Tatton Park.

We started the year at **Harrogate Spring Flower Show**. In normal years it is a struggle to find sufficient medal worthy examples of mature plants, as the show falls at the end of April and hostas are not usually fully emerged by then. This year, due to the early start to spring, we could have staged a dozen Chelsea standard gardens with the range we had available. We were very pleased to achieve our first Gold Medal of the year and meet regular customers once again.



Malvern Spring Flower Show was delightful as ever and we were over the moon to gain our first ever RHS Gold Medal for our display in the marquee. We are still in a state of shock, since it has taken us twenty years of effort to reach a standard the judges approve of. Malvern is an excellent show for us because we are able to showcase so many different varieties of hosta there. By having our second stand outside, beside the Rock Garden, we were able to offer 250 different species and cultivars to our keen collectors. This year's Malvern Show turned out to be a record breaker for us but we were plum tuckered out by the time we all finally arrived home. Robin hurt his back loading at the end of the show and was unable to drive his lorry back. This meant that Roy and Melanie had to travel all the way back to Malvern on the Tuesday after the show to

retrieve the second lorry.

The last Sunday of May saw us at our local Plant Heritage event, which is held at **Helmingham Hall** in Suffolk each year. This plant sale goes from strength to strength and an increased number of specialist nurseries attended this year. The weather was fabulous, the surroundings beautiful, and a great day out was had by all. When Roy and Melanie arrived back at the nursery they found Robin and Yvonne had also been very busy, even having visitors from Derbyshire, who had been disappointed by their visit to Chelsea and decided to make a slight detour on their way home to buy from us instead.

After Helmingham we had two weeks to complete the design for a 17' circular display, designed for the marquee at **Gardeners' World Live**, as well as a 10'

Best year so far...

At the end of every season we reflect on factors that have positively and negatively affected the year. This season the extra help we received from Roy being with us, helping with all aspects of the shows and at the nursery. This is a labour-intensive business but not one you can easily draft resources into. Roy used to be involved with the business back in the early days and so was able to hit the ground running - literally.

Highlights

- > Gold Medals at Harrogate, Malvern and Tatton
- > Best Feature for Plant Heritage Marquee at Hampton Court
 - > Early spring
- > More visitors to nursery
- > Increasing mail order

Lowlights

- > Totally Plants at Hampton Court
- > Plant Heritage at Tatton
 - > Having to pull out of Harrogate Autumn
- > Earlier end to the season

Our view of 'Totally Plants' at Hampton Court Flower Show

Perhaps the show is too large and needs to contract a bit and concentrate on plants and gardening to become special again...

circular display for the Plant Heritage feature in Hall 17. Roy's wooden decking was a hit with visitors and showed off the plants to perfection. Unfortunately, the judges felt there was too much hard landscaping, so we missed out on another Gold Medal by just one point. The show was totally hectic, we were literally run off our feet, and at the end of it all, we realised this had been another best show at a particular venue. We have some tough acts to follow in 2012.

July brings our biggest challenge every year as **Hampton Court Palace Flower Show** and **Tatton Park Flower Show** have only 10 days between them.

The Plant Heritage exhibit at Hampton Court had 'The Living Library of Garden Plants' as the theme, and was judged to be the Best Feature of the show. This was a huge achievement for everyone involved and this year attracted many more visitors and many new members.

Traditionally we take an outside Plant Mall at Hampton Court. This year the RHS decided to try to update the image of this area in the body of the show, with a different design of sales/display units to be called Totally Plants. Unfortunately, despite the initial enthusiasm of everyone concerned, this feature failed to translate from paper to the execution. See the side column for our view.

The highlight of the **Tatton Park Show** for us was gaining our second RHS Gold Medal for another 17' circular display, featuring fragrant varieties. We are usually not able to display these lovely plants because they flower during August, when our major shows are over. They are ideal subjects for pots on patios during the summer when we are able to enjoy our gardens, and eat al fresco.

The weather during build up proved challenging but the show days were good and the re-positioning of the Floral Marquee was excellent. By contrast the Plant Heritage feature at the show did not fare as well this year, visitors seemed to miss it completely, probably because the marquee was sited well away from all other floral features. This display, a joint venture between Plant Heritage collection holders, achieved a Silver Gilt medal under Lindley judging rules.

Overall the show exceeded expectations. Many customers told us they had decided to visit Tatton instead of Hampton Court this year, and found themselves suitably impressed. It would be good if that trend continued. Tatton Park is such a lovely venue and it is hard to beat the trip on the courtesy bus, through the park each morning to start our day.

We were able to display the fragrant varieties again at **Hyde Hall** in August. The show did not attract as many visitors as last year, which was a shame. The Farmers Market, which coincided with last year's event did not take place this year, so that may have been a contributing factor. Many visitors told us that they only knew about the event because of our website. The early onset of spring resulted in an equally early start to autumn and it became apparent to us that we would have insufficient medal quality display plants available for **Harrogate Autumn Flower Show**. With great reluctance we decided to pull out the event at that stage to give the organisers a chance to find someone to fill our spot. It was a hard decision to make as we have never withdrawn from a show in twenty years of exhibiting but we were proved right as we headed off to **Wisley Flower Show** at the beginning of September. It was clear that the season was drawing to a rapid close for a lot of our fellow exhibitors too. We rounded off the year with the autumn Plant Heritage event at **Helmingham Hall**.

We still have some lovely stock available and this is a good time to plant. Hopefully, we should have around six weeks before any bad weather. Time for plants to get well established ready for winter dormancy.

Thank you to everyone who visited us at the shows and the nursery, not forgetting our loyal mail order customers. We look forward to seeing you again next season.

Next month: The latest developments at the nursery...

The Floral Marquee is now in a good location and being concentrated in one structure ensures that every exhibitor stands a chance of 'catching the eye'.

The location of Totally Plants was not good. There was no obvious way to access it because the 'Sounds of the Sixties Fashion Show' feature dominated the area.

Visitors were few and far between, arriving well into the afternoon and consequently there was no 'buzz' to the area.

The new configuration of the sales units allowed for a display to one side, rather than in front of the sales area. In many cases the displays were completely hidden beside the sales area, providing 'no shop window' and therefore no WOW factor.

The usable space inside the sales area was reduced, so that visitors could not comfortably browse.

Signposting finally arrived on day three with the area described as Plant Village. This was such a shame as there was so much potential for a really stunning feature.

On a personal point, after listening to the regular musical accompaniment to the fashion show for seven days, Yvonne was still waking up in the middle of the night with it playing in her ears, until we left Tatton Park ten days later. Now we know what they mean by brainwashing.

What did you think?

Do **email us** if you have any feedback on the show, which you would like to share.

The advice and opinions contained within this monthly newsletter have been formed over more than 35 years of experience with the Hosta genus. We are constantly learning and refining that knowledge and would welcome any suggestions that readers of this newsletter would like to make so please **contact us**.