

A CUT ABOVE

Andy Whelton, ornamental specialist in the Teagasc Horticultural Development Unit, and nursery stock advisor, Dónall Flanagan explore the benefits and success of species screening trials of ornamental plants which are currently being used in the expansion of the cut foliage industry, and talk about plans to expand this work for hardy nursery stock sector

Innovation in new products and keeping a close eye on the ever changing marketplace is vital for most businesses, but especially so in the ornamental and plant business given the regular changes in colour trends and designs.

To that end, Teagasc in conjunction with Bord Bia and in collaboration with Kildalton Horticultural College, set about putting in place a screening trial of plant material specifically focused on screening for new innovative species for the fledgling cut foliage industry five years ago.

There were three main objectives:

1. Establish contact with key players in the market and seek guidance and direction on trends
2. Identify and visit sources of new material in Ireland, the UK & Europe
3. Capture sample material and place in plots at Kildalton College for further technical and market evaluation.

Over 150 species of a wide variety of trees, shrubs and perennials have been established on a one hectare dedicated plot in Kildalton College, meticulously looked after by Catherine Gavin, Horticultural Technician and support staff in the education department. As well as plant hardiness and susceptibility to weather conditions, species are technically evaluated for suitability for cut foliage by examining in detail characteristics including leaf colour, leaf shape, leaf form, scent, volume/unit area, annual stem length, tree habit, and spray formation. Data on species susceptibility to pests and diseases is also gathered.

Critically, an evaluation of the acceptability of the new products by the trade and market response from the market are the determining factors in deciding whether further

work takes place on a species. The market evaluation is an integral part of this task and involves bringing some of the main cut foliage and flower buyers from the UK and Holland to participate in the evaluation process. These include personnel from the leading supermarkets such as Tesco, ASDA, Morrisons and key processors such as Flamingo Flowers Ltd and Flowerworld. In addition, Ireland's leading florists represent the florist sector on the assessment panel. This project has created great interest in the marketplace; no other country is so engaged and most of the big players are signed up to the process. New material continues to be added annually under a Teagasc funded project but already a number of species have shown potential and are now being further evaluated in agronomy trials that will lead to production blueprints in the species expansion phase.

AUTUMN AND WINTER BERRIES GENERATING INTEREST

Some of the candidates already showing potential for cut foliage and which merit evaluation for the garden centre and landscape trade include seasonal autumn and winter berried cultivars of *Hypericum*, *Symphoricarpus* and roses, most from the 'Magical' series bred by Kolster BV in Boskoop and selected for the market need for seasonal autumn colour. A range of cultivars provides a show of flower and berries of various colours from July to December. A number of new deciduous hollies (*Ilex verticillata*) were added to the collection in 2016 and will be assessed over the next number of seasons.

Herbaceous perennials being trialled include *Paeonia*, *Eryngium* and *Sedum* amongst others, with some cultivars



FROM LEFT: 1. NEW HERBACEOUS SPECIES IN THE TRIAL ARE *SEDUM* 'MAGICAL LIZZY', AND ONE OF THE NEW *ERYNGIUMS* FROM KOLSTER BV IN HOLLAND 2. BLACK STEMMED *HYDRANGEA* IS POPULAR AS BOTH A CUT STEM AND A GARDEN PLANT 3. NEW PLANTS WITH SUITABILITY IN THE CUT FOLIAGE, LANDSCAPE AND GARDEN PLANT MARKET PROVIDING SEASONAL LATE SUMMER, AUTUMN AND WINTER COLOURS BERRIED SPECIES OF *HYPERICUM*, *SYMPHORICARPUS* (SNOWBERRY) AND ROSE HIPS 4. *PHOTINIA* 'VULCANO' WITH DISTINCT TOOTHED LEAF MARGIN - A NEW CULTIVAR WITH A NUMBER OF AMENITY HORTICULTURAL USES.

again showing value as both cut flowers and showy garden plants.

Some of the common hedging species suffered in the weather events of 2010 and 2011 but now a range of new *Prunus* and *Photinia* cultivars are showing potential both for foliage and hedging use. *Prunus laurocerasus* 'Genolia' is already proving to be a superb upright form of laurel.

Swiss bred black stemmed *Hydrangea* is exciting the market and would appear to have a place as a garden plant in a mixed shrub border.

A range of 'newer' species of *Eucalyptus* not currently in the trade were planted in 2015 and some already appear to have potential across a number of the amenity areas.

PLANS TO SCREEN NEW PLANT MATERIAL FOR THE HARDY NURSERY & LANDSCAPE TRADE AND HOSTING EURO-TRIALS IN 2017

The success of the cut foliage trials has generated interest amongst the hardy nursery stock sector and a number of the species have already caught the eye of nurserymen and others in the amenity sector. As a result, plans are now being put in place to mirror the screening work with a focus on species that might be of interest in the garden and landscape trade. Under the stewardship of newly appointed Teagasc nursery stock specialist Dónall Flanagan, a group is currently being assembled to assess the merit of some of the species in the current plot and expand the plot to include 'newer' plant material from abroad in 2017. A key

aspect to address will be introducing plants with greater disease resistance to box blight and shot hole, for example. This work will be developed in tandem with the hosting of an international plant screening programme.

Euro-trials is the collaboration of eight European countries for plant assessment of emerging new nursery stock material. The goal of Euro-trials is to test and publish objective information about the best cultivars from different parts of Europe. The programme is currently running in: Netherlands, Germany, France, UK, Belgium, Austria, Finland and Ireland. *Physocarpus* will be trialled over five years, starting in 2017. Completed plant trials or some recently started include *Hydrangea*, *Buddleja*, *Vinca*, *Weigela* and *Hibiscus* (the latter two both hosted by FitzGerald's Nursery in Kilkenny). The nursery trials will be carried out in the field and also in container production to assess their suitability for commercial production. They will be grown under a range of systems, the focus of the trial being to set out production blueprints for each crop at the end of the project.

The marketplace has seen a steady rise in demand for perennials over the last five to 10 years with traditional shrubs sales static or in slight decline. The new work will bring innovation and interest to a sector that has been hit hard in recent years and will present opportunities for ornamental businesses in the future. The industry will get an opportunity to view current and new material at future open events in the college.

In the meantime, if you are interested in finding out more about the range of material in trial and about new developments in this whole area, feel free to contact Catherine Gavin at Kildalton College (051 643 105) or Teagasc specialists Andy Whelton (087 784 8065) or Dónall Flanagan (087 703 5823). ✪



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FIELD VIEW OF ORNAMENTAL FOLIAGE SPECIES SITE KILDALTON COLLEGE

