



Quest for unique plants

Never-ending efforts to give gardeners something different

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DAVID HOBSON

The residents of the French mission in a small, remote town in southwest China must have been surprised when George Forrest knocked on the door. This was in 1904 in a region close to the border with Tibet, a time and place where foreigners were not always welcome. The locals were to be even more surprised a few days later.

Forrest, from Scotland, just happened to be in the area on a plant-hunting expedition. He stayed at the mission while seeking out rare specimens in the rhododendron forests nearby. It almost became his last expedition.

On his return from a day of exploring on a nearby hillside, he found the mission had been attacked by rebels who left no one alive. Disguised as a Tibetan and helped by local indigenous people, Forrest narrowly made his escape, trekking barefoot over mountain passes and through dense jungle, no doubt tramping over the plants he'd come seeking.

Plant hunters could easily be described as

botanical Indiana Joneses. They sailed with Captain Cook on his first great voyage in 1768 and still today are exploring remote corners of the world seeking rare plants. They have a scientific interest in rare flora, but are also responding to the insatiable desire of gardeners everywhere who want to grow something different – but prefer not to trek through remote jungles in search of new plants. It's so much easier to brave the eager crowds on the May 24 weekend expedition to the local garden centre. Perhaps you won't find the original plants, but close relatives.

Our familiar begonias, geranium, and petunias, at one time considered the rarest of plants, were not the wonderfully floriferous ones we see today. We can thank the hybridizers for that. A hybrid is created when breeders cross-pollinate two distinct species of a plant, hoping to produce offspring containing the best traits of the parents.

Thanks to those plant hunters, breeders can work with related species that wouldn't otherwise be found flirting together. For



example, over 1,800 species of begonia have been discovered in subtropical and tropical parts of the world. All have unique features and when any two are crossbred, the result can be an exciting new hybrid headed for the garden centres. It could be a more pendulous plant, more floriferous, have bigger blooms or be more fragrant.

Besides producing plants with unique features, hybridizers work hard at developing ones that are disease resistant. This is partly in response to an increased awareness that resolving problems with a spray bottle is harmful to the environment.

Due to fungal diseases, particularly blackspot, roses have always been a challenge to grow. Without an effective and environmentally friendly way to control these problems, many gardeners have given up on them. Even the Centennial Rose Garden at the Royal Botanical Gardens in

Burlington, planted in 1967, has fallen victim to a changing climate and disease-prone roses. A complete rejuvenation of the rose garden started in 2017 with a focus on disease-resistant, cold-hardy varieties.

One such rose, newly available to

gardeners this spring, is aptly named 'At Last.' Many roses have been introduced over the years with claims of being new and improved, but often at the expense of that quintessential quality — an unmistakable fragrance. With sunset shades of coral, the sweetly scented clusters of flowers on 'At Last' resemble those of a classic tea rose, yet it's a vigorous, disease-resistant plant.

These are admirable qualities, but to the casual observer, it's still a rose. Plants that have a truly unique appearance are more likely a rare exotic specimen, or simply a variety that's not widely marketed. Most gardeners are dependent on what's available

at large garden centres, and that typically means something selected for production far up the supply stream, months or even years earlier. No matter how exciting an introduction is, often a patented hybrid, if it doesn't capture the public's interest and doesn't sell, it may never be seen again.

There are thousands of flowering plants that we could grow, but they're not available simply because they're not chosen for production. Dedicated gardeners, however, will track down unusual ones at nurseries and small suppliers, swap or trade online, or seek them out in seed catalogues. Often, it's a fortuitous discovery of an interesting specimen followed by the satisfaction of growing it successfully.

Many years ago, I bought seeds for Eustoma grandiflorum. Also known as Lisianthus, it was new to me and I'd never seen it offered as a plant. After starting the seeds

indoors in early January, it took months before it finally flowered, but what a treat it was. A North American native, Eustoma grows on the southern prairies, particularly in Texas where it's called the Texas bluebell. It's hardly a perfect blue and more at home on the range, but there are now refined varieties in violet, lavender, pink and even one with odd green flowers.

I might have had trouble finding plants here in Canada, but Japanese breeders were long ago busy developing Eustoma varieties for the cut flower industry. Despite their delicate appearance, the flowers are tough and long-lasting, in a colour range to satisfy any wedding planner. So successful were they, Eustoma became known in Denmark as the 'Japanese rose.'

And that's the surprising feature of this flower. To the casual observer, the blooms on certain varieties are easily mistaken for

a rose. This is especially so on a recently introduced series called Mariachi, produced by Sakata Ornamentals of Japan. The glaucous colour of the leaves is a hint that the plant is not a rose, and the blooms don't have any fragrance at all, but then there are no thorns to deal with — another plus for the wedding flowers.

The foliage alone can be the principal feature of an unusual plant. The popular Heuchera, for instance, is available in an endless range of colours with deliciously descriptive names such as Peach Flambe, Chocolate Ruffles or Dolce Key Lime Pie. There are so many now we can all have a different dessert.

Grown for its startling foliage is Strobilanthes dyerianus or Persian Shield. It can't survive our winters, but it can be the star of summer on a sunny patio. The green and purple leaves have an extraordinary,

iridescent silver sheen that glistens in the sun. The flowers, if they even appear, are insignificant, and yet so impressive is this shrub-like plant from Myanmar, it was awarded The Royal Horticultural Society's Award of Garden Merit.

Another plant from Asia that will certainly survive winter is an equally fascinating perennial. It isn't noted for its foliage but for the unusual shape of the flowers. Prior to opening fully, each one resembles a perfectly formed Montgolfier balloon. A few pensive moments and you'll imagine yourself drifting over Paris — France, or Brant County. No surprise then it's called the balloon flower. The botanical name is Platycodon grandiflorus, and grand it is, growing to knee height. Less grand, though only in size, is a dwarf variety in a series called Astra. All are available in pastel shades of pink, purple, and white, with

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Calla Lily

single or double blooms.

Double blooms, or double-flowered, describes a flower with extra petals, a flower within a flower such as a typical rose or carnation. This was a genetic abnormality first recognized a couple of thousand

years ago that has since been encouraged and developed by flower breeders.

Other abnormalities can spontaneously appear due to fasciation. It causes the stems and flowers of almost any plant to be malformed in odd, unpredictable ways.

There are plants that appear completely

different from what is expected simply because the more familiar ones are so widely grown. Clematis, for instance, are seen in gardens everywhere, clambering up a trellis or arbor, filled with magnificent blooms. There are countless varieties of these climbing vines; much less common are the short, shrubby ones. I call them clematis in disguise because they have no tendrils and cannot climb, growing only to about 50 centimetres. My favourite is Clematis integrifolia 'Blue Ribbons'. It is indeed quite blue with small, bell-like flowers. After flowering the silvery seed heads that remain are as interesting as the flowers.

pigment is complex. That's unfortunate because honey bees and other pollinators are attracted to blue flowers. Among the bluest of flowers are those of Gentiana. From this comes gentian, that specific shade of dark blue. Gentian also has medicinal properties. This was discovered a couple of centuries ago by Gentius, an Illyrian king, for whom the plant is named. The roots of some types are still used today in the production of aperitifs, tonics, and bitters.

Species of Gentiana have been discovered growing all around the world, typically in Alpine conditions. Many do not adapt easily outside their native habitat; however, a number have been cultivated for garden use. Gentiana 'True Blue' is the result of a breeding program by plant hunter and hybridizer, Darrell Probst of Massachusetts, who had success combining several species

found in Japan.

As a modern-day explorer, during a plant hunting expedition on the Zhongdian plateau in southwest China, Probst had the incredible experience in 1996 of standing in a Gentian-filled meadow in full bloom. This was in the very region where our intrepid explorer George Forrest had his narrow escape 90 years earlier.

The species growing there was Gentiana sino-ornata, first discovered and brought to the west by Forrest. Undeterred by his harrowing experience, he'd bravely returned to the same region on seven more occasions, collecting thousands of specimens for the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh and further satisfying those avid collectors of the early 20th century who wanted something unique and unusual for their gardens, or at least something their neighbour wasn't growing. 

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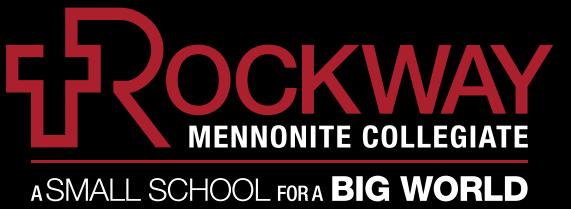


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