

Christopher Lloyd

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The RHS trials of vegetables and flowers both from seed and plants, carried out on the Portsmouth Field at Wisley, are, in my opinion, of supreme importance. Nowhere else in the world are similar trials conducted but their seeds and plants are drawn from all over the world, so this is a testing ground where comparisons can be made.

It is not, I believe, sufficiently recognised by the visiting public, partly because the field is a little outside the centres of attraction, partly because the average visitor doesn't know what to look out for and partly because of the constant din from the adjoining A3 Portsmouth Road. You can (almost) ignore this if you try. That the trials need publicity and recognition is imperative because they are expensive to run and are in constant danger of paring down or extinction due to the arguments of accountants, who can see the bottom line but have no idea of what is meant by value.

Still vivid in my mind's eye was the trial that came to a head in the spring of last year, of small-flowered violas. Till then, I had no conception of what a range they offer and what a tremendous and prolonged display. Sown in July (generally the best month for all pansies and violas), they started flowering in October; many were going strong in January but the overall display peaked in March and continued till June. Amazing.

The trouble with pansies is that their flowers are often too large for them to manage. The upper petals tend, from their own weight and expanse to collapse over the centre of the flower. Small-flowered violas have no such problems and the abundance of their blossom results in a greater display of colour than from the pansies. Do remember, though, when planting, that like many other flowers, they look towards where the light is brightest. Don't plant them so that they turn their backs on you.

The Jewel series, bred by Takii in Japan, was among the most impressive, especially 'Jewel Blue' and 'Jewel Yellow'. Also 'Sorbet Yellow Delight', though it shows signs of distress in warm weather. It is a mistake to view pansies and violas as year-round bedders. They all dislike summer heat and there are so many better alternatives for that season.

The biggest and most prolonged splash of colour in last summer's trials was from the annual rudbeckias. Giving the most prolonged display was one called 'Toto' - bright yellow with a black cone, smallish flowers on a rather dumpy plant of pretty uniform 30cm height. Plant breeders worship uniformity and density of colour above all virtues. Many of us actually prefer a bit of variation as being more relaxed, but 'Toto' gradually achieved something of this and its

cheerful persistence had to win me over in the long run.

For height (1m) and a big, bold bloom, interestingly shaped, 'Indian Summer', again in yellow and black, has my unqualified support, although there is some variation in the seed strain. A most unusual cone flower that well deserved its AGM, I thought, was the species *Rudbeckia amplexicaulis* (1m). Its black cone stands well above down-drooping rays of a softer yellow than most, while the oval leaves are soap-smooth, which is most unusual in this genus. It is sometimes, incorrectly, listed as *Ratibida*.

As with most annual seed strains, the mixtures do not compare well with single-colour strains. In rudbeckias, bronzing in zones or mixed in with yellow, also detracts from overall impact.

The trial of annual sunflowers was sown direct, which is the easiest way for many gardeners. And it was sown quite late, 15 May. So flowering was also lateish, at its height late August to early September. You must, of course, have your sunflowers facing the sun, or at least with a darker background. Those growing above 3m tall (fun for children), must have flowers that condescendingly look downwards. For youngsters, the kinds with one enormous flower to each plant will be the most popular, but their flowering season is short, generally a mere fortnight. F1 'Sunrich Lemon' was one of the best of these and a convenient 1.5m tall. For general border usefulness, a well branched plant is best, giving an extended flowering season and with blooms of moderate size. 'Valentine' (1.8m) has long been a favourite with us and it won the AGM. The black disc is highlighted by pale yellow rays. 'Pastiche' is a small-flowered mixture, useful for border work.

Perennial *Coreopsis* grown from seed were generally rather unsatisfactory, for one reason or another. The still current trial of perennial kinds grown from plants will prove a lot more serviceable. From seed, a number of strains like 'Early Sunrise' and 'Sunray', albeit brilliant yellow semi-doubles at their best, flower unevenly, some plants remaining totally vegetative in their first year. I am sure that many readers have run up against this irritating habit. Why can't they make up their minds one way or the other?

In most strains, a major fault is dying ungracefully - the faded blooms, unless removed at no longer than weekly intervals, spoil the display being made by blooms in their prime.

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