

## Garden Worthy Commercial Plants from England — Plus Some New Georgia Woody “Goodies”

**Michael A. Dirr**

Department of Horticulture, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia 30602-7273 U.S.A.

### **SABBATICAL LEAVE AT SIR HAROLD HILLIER GARDENS AND ARBORETA**

For the past 6 months I was on sabbatical leave at the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens and Arboreta, in England. They have possibly the largest collection of woody plants in the temperate world. I have been studying, photographing, collecting, traveling, and visiting kindred spirits. This has resulted in more than 5000 photographs, 400 pages of field notes, 112 gardens and nurseries visited, eight major articles written for *NMPRO* magazine, and over 100 new plants for evaluation in the span of 6 months. I have made terrific contacts that ensure the flow of new plant material. The English are as interested in U.S. plants and our breeding activities, as we are in their material. I met fanatical plants people from the greatest plant collector (Roy Lancaster) of my generation, to a former butcher (Richard Duke) who has the passion and collector's eye seldom seen in the most ardent professional. All shared information, plants sources, and their gardens.

Interestingly, a significant number of our Georgia nursery producers visited England during my 6 months sabbatical. All were embraced enthusiastically by the people we visited and myself. All believed that significant opportunities are available for plant and information trading. In May 1999, four nurserymen purchased 84 plants of which 70 made it through customs.

John Woodhead, Manager, Nursery Operations at Hillier told me that new products (plants) are the absolute key to his company's future. The word EXCLUSIVITY was a recurring tenet of his conversations. New perennials are a dime a dozen, trees and conifers have no market appeal (no space), whereas new flowering shrubs are the major focus, but in abbreviated supply. Hillier's hired a Ph.D. to conduct in-house research and conduct plant breeding. Something that was absolutely unheard of in English nursery circles until now. John provided numerous examples to me and stateside visitors about the ECONOMIC essentiality of new plants. Hillier's strives for at least a 5% net profit on each plant type with overall net profit approaching 15%. On great new products like *Cotinus coggygria* Golden Spirit<sup>TM</sup> smoke tree, released this summer, the net return is 60%. All 15,000 plants were sold immediately at £6.85 (\$11.30 U.S.) per 3.8-liter (1-gal) container. Average price for everyday 3.8-liter common denominator plants is £2 to £3 (\$3.30 to \$4.95 U.S.).

I sense the feeling among the Hillier staff that any nursery can grow a plant, but not to their quantity and quality specifications and uniqueness. In fact, many specialty growers I visited had nothing approaching the quality of Hillier's. To be sure, lists of 200 salvia, or 150 magnolias, or 90 hydrangeas are exciting to the collector. However, the “stick in the bucket” approach will doubtfully work at the better garden centers and mass market venues.

I believe my sabbatical will yield fruits for our Georgia and southeastern nursery profession well into the next century.

## POTENTIAL NEW PLANTS FOR CONSIDERATION

*Abelia chinensis*, *A. floribunda*, *A. mosaenensis*, *A. schumannii*, *A. spathulata* — A unique mix of germplasm for developing commercial cultivars.

*Aucuba japonica* 'Crotonifolia', 'Marmorita', 'Hillieri', 'Pink Champagne' — New hybrids with 'Rozannie' × 'Crotonifolia'.

*Buddleja davidii* 'Dartmoor' × *B.* 'Lochinch' seedling — A chance seedling with blue-purple flowers, gray foliage.

*Cephalanthus occidentalis* var. *angustifolia* (Hillier) and *Cephalanthus occidentalis* 'Statesboro White' — Questing after a compact form.

*Cotinus coggygria* Golden Spirit™ smoke tree, *C. szechuanensis* — Unique species with wavy leaves already hybridized with *Cotinus* 'Grace'. The first named clone is 'Dusky Maiden'.

*Daphne* × *burkwoodii* 'Pam's Gold' — Wow, an excellent plant!

*Euonymus alatus* f. *microphyllus* — A beautiful compact, fine-textured leaf type with red fall color. Would compete favorably with 'Compactus'.

*Hydrangea arborescens* 'Bounty' — An impressive sterile-flowered form. May prove a substitute for 'Annabelle'.

*Hydrangea macrophylla* — Chasing a perpetual flowering clone and/or series. A devastating freeze in England provided the opportunity to survey rebloomers and cold hardy types. Of 150 taxa observed, only 5 have significant rebloom potential.

*Hypericum* species — The late J.C. Raulston got me excited about *Hypericum galioides* 'Brodie'. This sabbatical has opened my eyes to its breeding potential.

*Indigofera decora* 'Rosea', *I. heterantha*, *I. himalayensis*, *I. kirilowii*, *I. pendula*, *I. potaninii* — An opportunity for great range of flowering shrubs. They flower on new growth.

*Magnolia* 'Summer Solstice' — A magnificent hybrid between *Magnolia globosa* (hardy form) × *M. hypoleuca*.

*Parrotia persica* 'Lamplighter', 'Pendula', 'Spinners' — Has more variation that I ever imagined.

*Sarcococca hookeriana* — Two unique clones with willow-like leaves. *Sarcococca orientalis*, *S. ruscifolia* 'Dragon Gate'.

*Spiraea formosana*, *S. chamaedryfolia* var. *ulmifolia*, *S. japonica* 'Red Princess', 'White Gold', 'Snowball'.

*Thuja occidentalis* 'Malonyana' — Has a telephone-pole-like habit.

*Trachelospermum jasminoides* 'Variegatum' — Has a beautiful cream-margined leaf form with increased hardiness.

*Viburnum* × *burkwoodii* — Cultivars such as 'Anne Russell', 'Chenaultii', 'Park Farm Hybrid' are tremendously confused. The latter is the superior cultivar.

*Viburnum utile* — A great source of quality genes. The late Don Egolf knew this and produced 'Eskimo', 'Chesapeake', 'Conoy', 'Mohawk'.