



Exotic charms

He's Italian, he's passionate, and for the past 25 years he has enjoyed a love affair with a beautiful angel – the voluptuous *Brugmansia*. Meet Signor Luigi Valducci

WORDS JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR PHOTOGRAPHS JANE SEBIRE

Luigi Valducci's favourite forms of angel's trumpet include *Brugmansia* 'Full Rosea Magic'.
OPPOSITE As well as brugmansias, Luigi's allotment is packed with sweet peas, cabbages and even a small orchard.



national collection

In brief

WHAT National Collection of *Brugmansia*.
WHERE Near Shrewsbury.
SIZE Combined plot of 3½ allotments.
SOIL Light soil that does not retain water very well.
CLIMATE Windy, with quite cold winters.
SPECIAL FEATURES 80 different kinds of *Brugmansia*, housed in a greenhouse during the winter.





Luigi in the greenhouse that he built to overwinter his precious National Collection of Brugmansia.

“There is an old wives’ tale that a flower draped over a sleeping person’s face will kill them with no trace. That is, Luigi assures me, nonsense”

seedpods) and these seeds can throw up almost anything. Luigi himself has bred a few, including one he calls ‘Kitci’, which means ‘Who are you?’ in his native Rimini dialect.

“In some parts of their native South America brugmansias were almost wiped out because people feared that they were very poisonous,” says Luigi. There is even an old wives’ tale that a flower draped over a sleeping person’s face will kill them with no trace. That is, Luigi assures me, nonsense: “I did have a customer who kept a plant in his bedroom. He told me that the scent had given him, er... ‘exotic’ dreams – but that is all.”

In fact all parts of this plant *are* highly poisonous if ingested, but due care and attention is all that is needed.

At the Valducci Horticultural Site, as a notice proudly proclaims at the entrance, there is a charming mixture of everyday gardening and high horticulture, reflecting the fact that Luigi has won an RHS Gold Medal at Tatton Park and seven golds at the Shrewsbury Show. This mixture is echoed in the many hand-painted signs, some homely (‘All my hurts my garden spade can heal’) and some profound (Ovid’s *flumina pauca vides da magni fuintibus orta*, meaning ‘great rivers sprout from tiny springs’).

Signor Valducci is an enthusiast for life, for gardening, for people, for food and, of course, for brugmansias. Any regrets? “Only that every winter I have to carry 80 heavy pots inside and in spring I must bring them out again. On those days I sometimes wish I had chosen African violets.” □

BBC James Alexander-Sinclair, a professional gardener and designer, regularly presents BBC gardening programmes including coverage of the RHS flower shows such as Chelsea.



1



2



3

Luigi’s best brugmansias

1. *Brugmansia arborea* One of the seven species of *Brugmansia*. Luigi grows it in open ground, although it must be dug up in autumn. “It is never without flower and seeds itself prolifically.”
2. *Brugmansia suaveolens* ‘Sunset’ “This has the best scent of all,” and striking variegated leaves.
3. *Brugmansia* ‘Full Rosea Magic’ Semi-double pink flowers. Each blossom is about 30cm long.
4. *Brugmansia* × *candida plena* ‘Angel Flight’ “This is my desert island plant. It is quite rare but the flower colour and smell is fantastic.”
5. *Brugmansia* ‘Pride of Hanover’ About the longest flower – 45cm of pure white.
6. *Brugmansia* ‘Herzenbrücke’ Very free-flowering yellow with orange edges. Finely pointed petals.
7. *Brugmansia* × *candida plena* ‘Angel’s Wings’ White flowers with flyaway points to each petal.

Luigi’s tips on caring for brugmansias

- Take cuttings in September: Luigi stands them in water until roots show and then pots them on.
 - They grow very quickly, so bear in mind that they will eventually need a big pot.
 - In spring the roots can be pruned to stop them outgrowing their pot.
- Pot-grown plants need to be fed – a lot – if you want them to thrive. Use a good balance of nitrogen and potash.
- Brugmansia may get viral diseases or red spider mite. Increasing the humidity helps control the latter.



4



5



6



7

On the edge of Shrewsbury is a small patch of 18 allotments: rows of cabbages, the odd fruit cage, a couple of sheds – but wait... something unexpected lurks at the back of the site. Here, among asparagus beds and chicory, are rows of supremely exotic plants with enormous trumpet-shaped flowers. This is the allotment of Luigi Valducci, holder of the National Collection of Brugmansia.

Signor Valducci is nearly 80 years old. He has been working this ground for the past 35 years and shows no signs of slowing down. He has lived in England for 45 years and worked as a hairdresser and then as a dermo-trichologist; in this latter capacity he has lectured all over the world. In addition he now looks after three and a half plots that overflow with an eclectic abundance. Scattered through the allotment site are a rose-covered pergola, topiary hedges, a small orchard and, of course, the brugmansias.

“My first meeting with the plants,” says Luigi, “was 25 years ago in my sister-in-law’s garden in Italy. They were wrongly labelled as *daturas* [a common error: *datura* blooms point upwards] but the size and magnificence of the flowers

captivated me.” From those few cuttings, Luigi’s collection slowly grew with additions from all over the world; he now has about 80 different brugmansias.

Hard labour of love

Each occupies a hefty container and can bear no frost at all. Every winter, Luigi moves them into the large greenhouse that he has built for them. But the rewards are worth the labour. Brugmansias make fabulously exotic pot plants: they are capable of phenomenal growth (about 1.8m in a year) and, around the end of June, they start to produce scores of huge flowers. Native to South America, they thrive in many other countries, climate permitting. They are pollinated in the wild by moths and, as a result, “The scent in the evening is overpowering: so sweet that it is almost sickly,” says Luigi. The flowers vary in colour from purest white to plum red. The depth of colour is governed by weather: if the summer is cold the flowers will be more insipid.

Although there are only seven species, they have a pretty infinite capacity for hybridisation. They all produce seeds (one way of telling the parentage of a particular cultivar is from the size and shape of the