

Raymond Evison

Every so often magazines run reader surveys: you know the sort of thing: Most Reviled Weed or Most Attractive Gardeners' World Presenter. One of the perennial favourites is to ask, What is Britain's Favourite Garden Plant? In any list like this you can bet your shirt that clematis will be in the top five. Gardeners can't get enough of them.

A great deal of the credit for this should be laid at the immaculately shod feet of Raymond Evison. Many people will know the gentlemanly Mr Evison from his many books, his quietly authoritative lectures and his crowd-stopping Chelsea exhibits. He is the public face of the clematis: few

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people in history know more about the plant than Raymond.

He has been growing and selling them since he left school at the age of 15, in 1960. He says he won a place at Pershore College to study horticulture “but never had the time to take it up”. By the age of 20 he was lecturing there and four years later he was managing director of Treasures of Tenbury, the Worcestershire nursery and garden.

He left for Guernsey in 1984. “The winter of 1980-1 was fierce and we lost many plants. I discovered that, whereas in Worcestershire we had to stop growing in July, the climate here means we can carry on until October.”

For centuries, Guernsey growers have supplied the mainland with everything from flowers to tomatoes. Today Raymond runs seven acres of glasshouse producing about four million cuttings a year. He sells plants in 28 countries and controls about 20 per cent of the world clematis market.

His nursery is a slick operation. Computer-controlled glasshouses

With a string of gold medals from the Chelsea Flower Show, the career of this champion clematis grower glitters brightly

WORDS JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR PHOTOGRAPH CHARLIE HOPKINSON

watch over up to 40,000 plants as they develop from three-inch cuttings to saleable plants. The journey lasts about two and a half years. During that process more cuttings are taken from the cuttings, so the process is miraculously self-supporting.

As well as the commercial side there is another glasshouse where the painstaking process of developing new cultivars takes place. Disappointingly, it is not a James Bond-style secret

hideout with girls in bikinis, but from here Raymond has introduced more than 100 new plants to our gardens.

The breeding process is a little like a cross between the Grand National and the SAS selection procedure: many may come but few are chosen. The first hurdle is germination. Up to a third of the 30,000 seeds sown each year may fail. From these remaining only about 200 will be seen as worth developing further. They might trial a couple of dozen. These are comprehensively tested for vigour, flowering, disease resistance, hardiness and ease of propagation. “We will be lucky if more than a handful are deemed good enough for gardens”.

At the moment he is looking in particular for easily maintained, shorter cultivars with large flowers and a lengthy flowering period.

Does he have a favourite clematis? A tough question to ask a nurseryman, but he handles it with aplomb. “I am particularly proud of *Clematis Picardy*: an unusual colour,

long flowering and only about a metre high.” One of the new introductions is *Clematis Diamantina*, with pom-pom like blue flowers.

Raymond is keen on keeping things simple. His ideal clematis is pruned using “the pony tail cut”: the whole thing is chopped off in one go in early spring. “Complicated instructions put people off.”

Among the many cultivars he has brought to the market are such well-known cultivars as *C. 'Albina Plena'* and the popular late-flowering *C. cirrhosa* var. *purpurascens* 'Freckles'. The latter was named after his daughter Rebecca. Most of his family have plants named after them, except his wife Sarah. This might seem a bit of a basic domestic error but the ever smooth Mr Evison explains the simple reason: “I have yet to find one that I feel is good enough for her.”

Raymond's mission is to create better clematis and to put them in as many gardens as possible. At the same time he is generous with his time and energy. He's a vice president and trustee of the RHS, co-founder of both the NCCPG and the International Clematis Society, chairman of the Guernsey Horticultural Trust and award-winning author. Small wonder that his service to horticulture earned him a Victoria Medal of Honour from the RHS in 1995 and an OBE in 2000. And still he has time for planthunting and lecturing all over the world. Fear not, the clematis is in safe hands. □

NEXT MONTH Anja Oudolf

📺 This year will be Raymond Evison's fiftieth appearance at the Chelsea Flower Show. See page XX for our show preview

and details of TV coverage of the show.



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