



| *Epimedium* 'Royal Purple'

Epimediums: springing out of the shade

Hybridisation by both man and nature have produced a genus that delivers leaf and flower power in many shapes, sizes and colours, writes ROGER HAMMOND

The unusually shaped flowers and wiry leaf and flower stems, which are very strong for their diameter, are what attracted me to epimediums when a horticulture student at Writtle College in 1970.

I bought a few over the next 30 years until Linda, my wife, and I went to a spring show at the RHS Halls in Westminster. On the Blackthorn Nursery stand we were confronted by *Epimedium* the like of which we'd never seen. The dozen mainly new species, recently introduced from China, were so different they looked exotic, tropical even.

We were hooked and bought one of each that had not already sold out. Over the next few years we visited Blackthorn for its early spring open days and a few other nurseries, now also defunct, such as Washfield Nursery, that sold *Epimedium*. Our rate of progress was such that in August 2013 our epimediums were awarded National Collection status.

FAMILY TIES

Epimediums are perennials, many of which are evergreen, and provide very good winter interest. They belong to the *Berberidaceae* family and in a few Chinese species you can see, in the shape of the leaves, a strong resemblance to *Mahonia* (also in that family).

Their natural distribution is confined to the Old World, with by far the most species being found in China. Japan is the next richest in species. Other

countries with one or few species include Iran, Russia, Korea and Algeria.

FOUR SEASONS

The species produce flowers in spring of a considerable variety of shape, size and colour. Yellow and white are predominant, but many shades of pink through reddish pinks to purple are found within the Japanese species *Epimedium grandiflorum* and *sempervirens*. Hybridisation in nature and by man has given the gardener a wider colour palette including orange and many beautiful bicolour and tricolour flowers.

The leaves continue the interest into the autumn through the deciduous varieties with their distinct shapes that turn yellow brown colours. Some evergreens produce new leaves of eye-catching colours of solid blotched or mottled red that turn green after a few weeks. Some retain their interesting foliage throughout even the harshest winters. The leaves turn brilliant red in a few varieties in the winter but need more sun and a slightly drier spot to do this.

WHO SAID DRY SHADE?

We have had mixed success in their cultivation. Our most significant lesson is that despite being frequently recommended for dry shade, this is true only for a few, tough old hybrids and a couple of species. Even these must be well watered until fully established.

Of course "dry shade" is as inexact as the length of a piece of string, but we have lost more plants by allowing them to dry out (especially in a pot) than we have from overwatering. A severe drying out can be terminal.

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I *Epimedium* 'Amanogawa'

A THRUST ABOVE

Another much recommended cultural operation is to cut off the previous year's foliage as the new shoots appear. However, this is sound practice for only a few tough old varieties such as *E. x rubrum*, where the flowers may open below the canopy.

We do not prune most of our evergreens because the new flowers and leaves are generally thrust above the clump, while the older leaves tend to collapse outwards. Keeping the previous year's foliage is an insurance against slug and snail damage of new growth or a particularly hard spring frost that can occasionally damage or kill the shoots.

WHEN DECISIONS ARE MADE, PLANT HERITAGE IS THERE

Last April seven horticulturists with considerable knowledge of *Epimedium* met at our house on behalf of the RHS - its representative was there to chair the meeting - to discuss and agree Awards of Garden Merit. We had previously reviewed 360 plants, recommending whether or not any were suitable for new AGMs. Of those, 13 were put forward for AGMs; three retained their AGMs; and five were rescinded because they had been superseded by better, newer varieties, they were weak growers or their naming had become hopelessly confused in the trade.

New AGMs are: *E. acuminatum* 'Night Mistress'; *E.* 'Amber Queen'; *E.* 'Domino'; *E. fargesii* 'Pink Constellation'; *E. franchetii* 'Brimstone Butterfly'; *E. grandiflorum* 'Akagiza Kura'; *E. grandiflorum* 'Circe'; *E.* 'Kodai Murasaki'; *E.* 'Pink Champagne'; *E.* 'Red Maximum'; *E.* 'Royal Purple'; *E.* 'Spine Tinger'; *E.* 'Winters End'. The following retained their AGMs: *E. pinnatum* subsp. *colchicum*; *E. x rubrum*; *E. x versicolor* 'Sulphureum'. The following lost their AGMs: *E. grandiflorum*; *E. grandiflorum* 'Nanum' and 'Rose Queen' and 'White Queen'; and *E. x youngianum* 'Niveum'.

PERFECT COMBINATIONS

At one time we felt the Japanese species *E. grandiflorum* and its cultivars and hybrids were not suited to our garden as they rarely thrived. More recently, we have been growing them under the light shade of Japanese maples with much more success, though we are going to have to prune some maples to make sure the shade is not too heavy.

We remove the trees' foliage in November to allow snowdrops and *Cyclamen coum* planted between the epimediums to flourish; we have also inter-planted with *Roscoea*, which push up through the *Epimedium* canopy to flower in summer through to autumn.

Our advice is to give *Epimedium* a moist but not waterlogged soil, rich in organic matter. I bet you've heard that guidance before.

CROSS PURPOSES

Epimediums are easily propagated by division either in late summer or early spring. They are readily grown from seed; they are self-sterile but freely cross with other species and varieties. Breeders have recently produced

RECOMMENDATIONS

- My favourite: *Epimedium* 'Red Maximum'
- Linda's favourite: *Epimedium grandiflorum* 'Marchant's Twin Set'
- Fantastic leaf colour: *Epimedium myrianthum*
- Strongly coloured flowers: *Epimedium* 'Amber Queen'
- Dainty flowers: *Epimedium fargesii* 'Pink Constellation'

excellent new varieties from deliberate crosses, but random cross-pollinated plants can also be distinct and garden worthy.

It seems at long last epimediums may be receiving the recognition they deserve for being beautiful and useful garden plants. I can't wait for the day some of the AGM varieties are for sale in my local garden centre.

✿ The author is the holder of the reference Collection in Essex

✿ A horticultural Collection is held at RHS Wisley near Woking, Surrey



Epimedium 'Pink Champagne'



Epimedium 'Spine Tinger'