



PHOTOS BY ANDY WHELTON

5. THE HEAVILY DEMANDED TWIGS OF WILD *MYRICA* GALE (BOG MYRTLE) ON WHICH TEAGASC ARE CONDUCTING TRIALS TO EVALUATE THE FEASIBILITY OF CULTIVATION ON A FIELD SCALE.

FULL COLOUR

In a continuing series of articles on the agronomy and screening work on innovative novel plant material for use in the floristry trade, **Andy Whelton**, specialist in ornamental cut foliage crops at the Teagasc Horticultural Development Unit, describes what's emerging for autumn use from the Kildalton trial plots

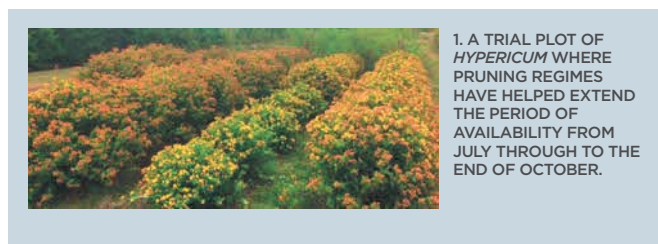
Albert Camus once said, "Autumn is a second spring when every leaf is a flower" and certainly the cut foliage trial plot in Kildalton is a blaze of color this time of year and a mecca for anyone in the floristry business looking for something different to whet the appetite of a discerning market. Innovation is critical to success amongst key players in the business such as supermarkets and high street florists, particularly given the regular changes in colour trends and designs in product development. Florists in particular are now looking to differentiate their offer from supermarkets and are paying premium prices to growers who are investing in innovative new species. Growers who invest in developing a strong brand in the marketplace, backed up with quality and reliability, will win as the market shifts from physical wholesalers to internet based platforms. Florists are now sourcing material more and more via on-line platforms such as Instagram, which is opening up new opportunities for growers to connect directly with customers. One such technology company, Florismart, has developed internet platforms which allow growers to present their products directly to florists in an open marketplace and they supply a marketing and distribution service to link the grower with the florist.

However you source your product and whether it's a seasonal bouquet, a floral gift for a special occasion or something that provides the wow factor at weddings or other events, novel foliages can often play a key role in providing something different to buyers and customers. Late summer/autumn coloured foliages and berries are ideal for filling that niche market gap at this time of the year by providing a major focal point in a floral product. The range of plant material in Kildalton was viewed recently at a field event hosted by Teagasc. The large gathering by the industry, which included representatives from the florist trade and growers, generated some lively discussion on the day and interesting views about some species on display.

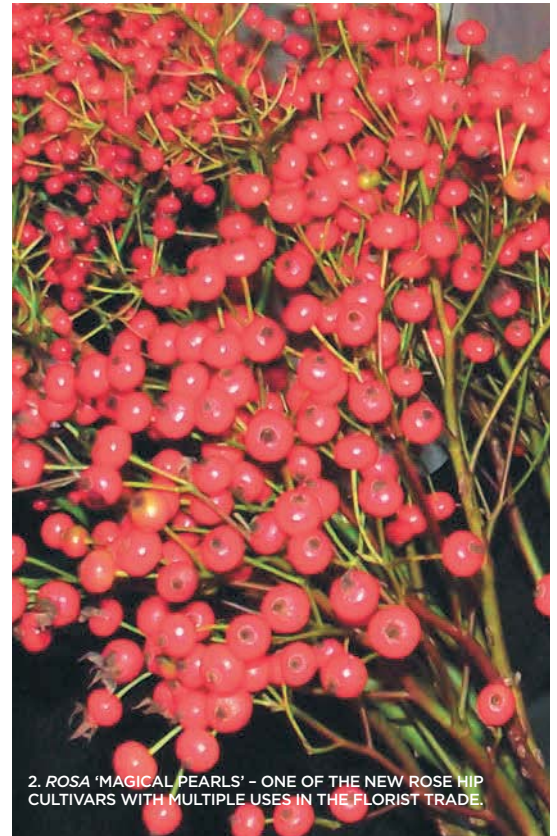
HYPERICUM, SNOWBERRY AND ROSE HIPS - NOT JUST PRETTY FLOWERS

Hypericum is a common garden plant that provides a spectacular show of yellow flowers in midsummer followed by an even bigger show of berries in late summer/autumn. Specially bred cultivars which give longer stem length for the cut flower trade provide a range of colours with versatility and use in several floral products. Recent trial work in Kildalton focused on evaluating a range of cultivars with different coloured berries (see table below). Red is still the most popular colour in the trade and this view was echoed by the visitors to Kildalton in August.

Extending the period of availability is also a key objective of the trials work in the college, and by side shooting stems in early June and cutting back the species at monthly intervals from April through to June continuity of supply can be provided from mid-July to late October. This makes the species useful to both the volume supermarket bouquet business and also the floristry trade well into the autumn. Most of the Dutch breeders' Kolster Bros 'Magical' series of cultivars being trialed are rust-free, but well-timed pesticide applications for control of botrytis, aphid and tortrix caterpillar are required to deliver high quality stems in our mild Irish climate.



RANGE OF <i>HYPERICUM</i> CULTIVARS IN KILDALTON	
CULTIVAR	BERRY COLOUR
'Magical Pumpkin'	Pink
'Magical Greenfall'	Green
'Magical Ivory'	Ivory
'Magical Tropical Fall'	Red



"Florismart has developed internet platforms which allow growers to present their products directly to florists in an open marketplace"

Cultivar evaluation and techniques to extend the availability of supply is also the aim of the work on snowberry or *Symphoricarpos*, which is a common hedgerow plant familiar to many in the early autumn, noted for its white flowers followed by pearly white berries which are its abiding feature. Cultivars from the Kolster stable with both white and pink berries have featured in the screening work in Kildalton and of the five evaluated, *Symphoricarpos* 'Magical Melody' which is white and the pink berried 'Charming Fantasy' came out tops in terms of stem yield and having well furnished stems with an abundance of berries. Available as a 'new' mono bunched product in some supermarket shelves for the first time this autumn, it's an example of the innovation taking place in the fast moving floristry trade. As with *Hypericum*, the availability period can be extended through well-timed pruning management. Maintaining the quality and shelf life of berried products after harvest can be challenging and therefore trials on using post-harvest treatments are currently the focus of further work at the college to determine the best practice.

Looking to later in the autumn and the early winter period in the run up to Christmas, rose hips were amongst the most popular species judging by the reaction of the gathering in Kildalton. From a showy display of bright pink colour in mid-summer emerges a bounty of autumn hips ranging from tiny light reds to bold dark rouges and oranges. Several cultivars are on trial. A trailing type 'Magical Pearls' has use in the wedding and event market while some of the shrub types with red to orange hips are best suited to the growing mixed bouquet trade. The species cannot be used until the leaves have fallen from the stems which usually occurs following the first frosts. Given the uncertainty as to when this occurs, harvest can be delayed so a trial looking at ways of defoliating the rose hips gets underway shortly to find a more accurate harvest date and extend the period of availability.

VIBRANT PURPLES OF *SEDUM*, *WEIGELA* AND *VIBURNUM*

The common herbaceous plant *Sedum* is also used as filler in the trade and is the subject of a variety trial in the college plot with stem yield data and quality being evaluated. Cultivars bred for stem length make super flower type fillers in the bouquet trade and while there are interesting new cultivars available showing promise, older cultivars such as 'Spectabile Brilliant' and 'Herbstfreude' while shorter stemmed are holding their own and offer a stunning display in centre piece product arrangements.

Some purple toned cultivars of *Weigela* with good stem length and leaf shape are creating excitement and versatility in the autumn range of floral offerings.

Weigela 'Shining Fantasy' is a new high yielding cultivar from Kolster Bros and is at its peak for approximately four

to five weeks from mid-September to late October. Whilst some deciduous *Viburnums* have outstanding autumn leaf colour, unfortunately they do not provide the minimum 10 days shelf life guarantee when cut which is necessary for the market. However, *Viburnum opulus* displays a fine show of red berries and can stand for at least two weeks which makes it a relevant player.

TAMING SOME OF OUR WILD SPECIES

Myrica gale (bog myrtle) is a native wild bog plant species that is widespread across much of the bogland in the midlands and west. A deciduous species, it is important for its distinctive tiny bronze coloured catkins which form on the twigs during the growing season and appear in a blaze of autumn colour once the leaves have dropped, usually in November. Sought after by the trade in vast quantities, it is extremely versatile and can be used fresh or painted, glittered or snowed and is widely used in many flower products particularly in the winter period and also all year round as it can be dried and stored for long periods. Trials on this plant species are aimed at capturing it from its wild habitat, developing a suitable propagation method and bringing it into cultivation on a field scale where quality and yield are being evaluated through tailored pruning regimes and other agronomy practices.

SALIX (WILLOW)

is another native species that thrives in our mild, damp climate and tolerates a wide range of soil types. While the common native *Salix* (often referred to as 'Sallys') is considered by many as a weed scourge, cultivars have been bred as ornamental garden plants with a number of others cultivated for biomass. A trial on five different coloured cultivars that have been bred specifically for the cut flower trade are being assessed in Kildalton to evaluate their suitability and ultimate place in the expanding cut foliage industry.

For information on any of the species discussed in this article or on the trials work at Kildalton, contact Andy Whelton at andy.whelton@teagasc.ie or check the Teagasc horticulture website at www.teagasc.ie/crops/horticulture/cutfoliage. *

Andy Whelton M Sc Ag Sc is a horticultural development officer in the Teagasc Horticultural Development Department based in Teagasc Clonakilty College and is specialist adviser on ornamental cut foliage. He has spearheaded the developments in cut foliage as a new sector in commercial horticulture. He also works closely with outdoor vegetable and protected crop businesses in Munster and south Leinster. You can contact Andy via andy.whelton@teagasc.ie.

