

PLANTSPROFILE



The 2006 busy lizzie trial at RHS Garden Wisley proved the garden worth of these plants, even in a long, hot summer

STILL KEEPING LIZZY BUSY

Love them or loathe them, irrepressible busy lizzies are easy to grow, tolerant of sun or shade and capable of providing colour all summer long, as **Martyn Cox** finds after a recent RHS trial. Photography by Tim Sandall

FEW OTHER PLANTS divide gardeners like busy lizzies: to some they are much-loved, floriferous gems ideal for livening up hanging baskets, patio containers and bedding schemes, while others will not even give them the time of day. Despite those who think these plants overused and old fashioned, busy lizzies remain among the most popular of summer-flowering plants and, if used with care, they can successfully inject a splash of colour to an otherwise dull space.

Impatiens walleriana cultivars or busy lizzies are grown for their bright, flattened flowers that appear prolifically, smothering plants from early summer until autumn. This

species hails from East Africa and has been subject to extensive breeding work giving rise to a dazzling array of colours – white, pink, red, orange and lilac are the most common hues of this perennial, usually treated as a half-hardy annual. However, there are many variations in tone, along with bicolours, picotees and flowers with a distinctive eye. Most have single flowers, but there are also semi- and double-flowered clones; most cultivars range between a diminutive 20cm to 60cm in height.

Trialling the best

Seed companies offer a large selection of cultivars and colour mixes, but to help gardeners choose the best, a trial was staged at RHS Garden Wisley during 2006. More than 186 entries were supplied from seed companies around the world with the aim of recommending those with the best garden performance for an Award of Garden Merit (AGM). After months of observation, from July to the end of September, the Floral Trials Sub-Committee put 25 cultivars forward for an AGM.



Despite the lack of shade on the trials field, plants performed exceptionally well over a long, hot summer, without the need for regular watering. 'It was a real eye-opener,' says Fergus Garrett, Head Gardener at Great Dixter in East Sussex and a member of the sub-committee. 'It was a harsh summer, but they never missed a beat – apart from one or two, they looked fantastic.' Also present was Bob Brown from Cotswold Garden Flowers. He suggests that well-maintained soil that holds moisture at the roots is more important for busy lizzies to thrive than slightly shaded conditions, although they are often grown as they flower well in even quite deep shade.

Single colours and mixtures

The ubiquitous colour among the busy lizzies awarded an AGM was red. This included large-flowered 'Candy Red' and 'Impuls Red', which produced masses of intensely coloured flowers above vigorous plants, and 'Candy Carmine', which flowered constantly over a long period; the sub-committee commended its self-cleaning habit, faded flowers falling cleanly from plants.

Pinks were well represented. Among these, 'Candy Deep Salmon' started flowering early and was notable for making robust, disease-resistant plants, while 'Expo Coral' had large flowers and an open habit that allowed unsightly dead petals to fall through and remain hidden. However, the undoubted highlight in this colour range was 'Stardust Salmon Improved'. It was recommended for an AGM on its first judging in July; sub-committee member Ian Howell, Technical Manager for Horticulture at DIY giant B&Q, says it was 'absolutely superb – a real showstopper that has set the standard for future bicolours.'

Although most of the busy lizzies that were seen to perform best were single colours, a few seed mixes also did well. Tempo Rouge mix is a blend of pinks and reds, while a mixture of salmon shades, Cajun Jambalaya mix, impressed through its uniform plants that were covered in flower. The selection of white, purple, violet and lavender colours in Envoy North Shore mix were said by the sub-committee to be 'well-balanced'.

Using busy lizzies in the garden

Part of the reason for the popularity of these plants must be their ease of cultivation. Raised from seed, sown in early spring at 16–18°C, plants grow quickly to flowering size; for busy gardeners, plug plants are freely available in spring. Favourite plants can be kept from year to year; cuttings root in water.

Many people who saw the trial were impressed by the impact made by busy lizzies grown in large blocks, rather than dotted individually as in bedding schemes or knitted into a hanging-basket display with other tender annuals. One way

to replicate this in gardens would be to grow a single colour in several containers or to plant a sweep of soil with a seed mixture of different shades – avoid serried rows or it will soon become a traditional display.

Fergus Garrett is planning an experiment with several AGM cultivars at Great Dixter. His aim is to have groups of busy lizzies snaking through a border, among perennials such as *Verbena bonariensis*, rudbeckia, cimicifuga and aconitum. He is looking to include plants that hold the planting together, helping the compact impatiens integrate.

So is it time to put any snobbish feelings about busy lizzies aside? The results of the trial would suggest so. This diminutive plant has managed to win new fans among many respected gardeners and plantsmen, some of whom have long dismissed it as 'tacky'. As plants that are easy to look after and can provide months of colour, they are hard to beat – the trick is to use them creatively to make a head-turning, dramatic display. ■

Martyn Cox writes a gardening column for *Sainsbury's Magazine* and has a small garden in east London

Suppliers: the busy lizzies mentioned should be widely available in local garden centres soon. Seed (for sowing next spring) should be in the 2007/2008 catalogues; most cultivars are listed already by Seeds-by-Size, 01442 251458, www.seeds-by-size.co.uk

IMPATIENS ON TRIAL

The following *Impatiens walleriana* cultivars in the 2006 RHS trial were awarded an RHS Award of Garden Merit (AGM):

● **Nomenclature note:** seed-raised cultivars that have a similar habit but a range of flower colours are often marketed using Series names

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| (Blitz Series) 'Blitz 3000 Red' | 'Expo Salmon Blush', 'Expo Salmon Rose' 10 |
| Cajun Series, Cajun Jambalaya mix, Cajun Uni mix | (Impuls Series) 'Impuls Deep Rose' 11 , 'Impuls Red', 'Impuls Salmon' |
| (Candy Series) 'Candy Carmine', 'Candy Deep Salmon' 1 , 'Candy Red' 6 , 'Candy Scarlet' | (Stardust Series) 'Stardust Rose', 'Stardust Salmon Improved' 2 |
| (Carnival Series) 'Carnival Salmon' | Tempo Series, Tempo Rouge mix |
| (Envoy Series) 'Envoy Cherry' (syn. Encore Series) 'Encore Cherry' 8 , Envoy North Shore mix (syn. Encore North Shore mix) | (Xtreme Series) 'Xtreme Salmon', 'Xtreme White' |
| (Expo Series) 'Expo Blue Pearl' 5 , 'Expo Coral', 'Expo Lavender Blue', 'Expo Lilac' 7 , 'Expo Rose Picotee', | ● Also pictured (above): 'Expo Wine' 3 , 'Cajun Orange' 4 and 'Balance Rose Picotee' 9 |