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**Epimedium:
an exciting
evolution**

Colin Moat

Fig. 12 *E. fargesii* 'Pink Constellation'

I had my first encounter with this amazing range of plants in the 1980s, but my involvement with them developed in earnest about 20 years ago, when we moved to a much larger garden with a lot of shade, situated on greensand. We also had a much smaller budget, due to the matching ratio of mortgage to garden!

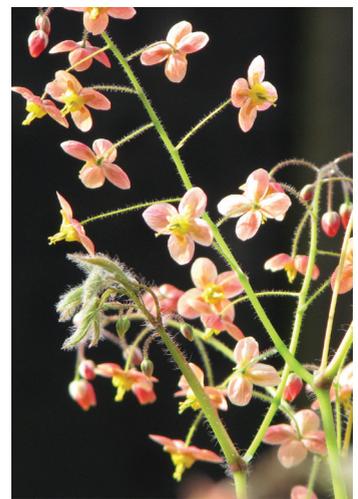
Being a member of the HPS Kent group and having access to the plant sales table at meetings was hugely useful and once, among many plants that were on display, I found *Epimedium* x *warleyense* 'Orangekönigin', which is still growing happily in my garden today (fig. 1). Prior to the move I had started a fledgling nursery which I ran alongside my 'proper' job, and by attending plant fairs, I managed to find a few more epimedium varieties. I was tempted by the colour range of their flowers and

foliage, and impressed by their resilience. They fitted in nicely with the nursery, which I was slowly moving towards specialising in shade-loving perennials.

A turning point for me was meeting, and later becoming friends with one of Europe's leading epimedium growers and breeders, Koen van Poucke, on our twice-yearly visits to Beervelde Plant Fair in Ghent, Belgium. He gave me valuable guidance by recommending varieties that he rated highly, and advising on how best to grow them.

Moving on a few years to 2012, I was in the fortunate position of being able to take early retirement from the 'proper' job and fulfil my wish to run our nursery more or less full-time. I built up enough confidence to present displays of shade-loving plants at the

RHS Spring Plant Fair in Lindley Hall, Westminster, and these highlighted many epimediums. At one of these events in 2017, I was approached by the Chair of the RHS Herbaceous Plant Committee, who advised that they were setting up a Round Table forum to review and recommend Awards of Garden Merit



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Fig. 1 *Epimedium* x *warleyense* 'Orangekönigin'

(AGMs) – and would I invite other specialists to join, and consider being Chair myself! I was very flattered, and definitely felt it was above my ‘pay grade’, but said yes. Round Table forums are used by the RHS when it is impractical to have a full three-year trial, and where the lack of AGMs (at the time there were only eight) is in need of review.

This was a very timely suggestion, as over the last 20 years the number of available epimediums has risen from around ten (mainly species), to approaching 400. This has been due to people like Darrell Probst in the USA, and Mikinori Ogisu in Japan, finding and distributing new species, the latter mainly from China and surrounding areas. Epimediums are remarkably promiscuous, and in addition to those mentioned above, our own nurserymen such as Robin White, Julian Sutton, Elizabeth Strangman, Keith Wiley, and Thierry Delabroye in France, have taken these new species and crossed them with others, new and old, producing and more importantly, *selecting* some wonderful hybrids. Unfortunately, many other less-wonderful plants, in many cases very similar to those currently available, have also been produced and named.

So, not without some trepidation, I invited

Julian Sutton (formerly of Desirable Plants), Roger Hammond (National Collection Holder), Koen van Poucke, Sally Gregson (author of *The Plant Lover’s Guide to Epimediums*), Quentin Stark (Head Gardener, Hole Park), and James Miller (RHS Wisley) into the forum. Kept on track by RHS Coordinator Kirsty Angwin, we all met on 17 April 2018 at the home of the National Collection Holder. It was a fascinating day, and despite there being a roomful of epimedium enthusiasts, from a short-list of approximately 100 forms (one of the criteria for selection is availability), only 15 new AGMs were

awarded; and five of the eight existing AGMs were rescinded, with only three being re-confirmed.

I suspect that the majority of members who grow the older species like *E. x warleyense*, *E. x perralchicum*, *E. x versicolor*, *E. alpinum*, *E. pinnatum* and their named forms and subspecies, justifiably consider them to be very useful ground cover (fig. 2). This is mainly due to their rhizomatous nature forming a very woody root structure, which in turn makes them pretty drought-tolerant. The committee were mindful of the added value this gives them for difficult garden conditions, as shown below. I have listed the AGM names in bold, and added extracts of comments from the forum in italics after each name.

AGMs were reconfirmed to *E. x rubrum*: ‘a good tough plant – provides good ground cover for a large area – hardy and reliable – strong doer without being invasive in dry shade’; *E. x versicolor* ‘Sulphureum’: ‘reliable in deep shade, tough as old boots and has good young foliage’; and *E. pinnatum* subsp. *colchicum*: ‘good evergreen ground cover for large areas – excellent and a good doer – works well in dry shade’. A hybrid from Julian Sutton with similar characteristics (although I purchased it from Coen Jansen in the Netherlands) was *E.* ‘Winter’s End’:

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Fig. 2 ‘Probably’ *Epimedium x versicolor* ‘Sulphureum’ at RHS Harlow Carr

'early flowering with flowers above leaves – tolerant of bad conditions', received an AGM for the first time (figs 3-7).

The slight drawback of some of the above is that the old foliage needs shearing back, preferably before new growth starts (I suggest January, or about when you cut back hellebore foliage). This yields a double reward: emerging flowers are not obscured by old foliage, and fresh new foliage follows, often beautifully patterned. If you leave it too late, it is very fiddly to cut out old growth and avoid the new, as I know to my cost!

One well-known species and its forms which don't have this problem are the deciduous *Grandiflorum epimediums*, which have a preference for somewhat

acid (below 6.5pH) soils. *E. grandiflorum*, which is more clump-forming in habit, has the largest number of named varieties; but all four of those that previously had held AGMs had them rescinded. *E. grandiflorum* itself was one, for the reason that it was felt to be 'too variable, both in cultivation and in the wild'. The others were generally felt to have been superseded by better ones, including *E. g.* 'Akagi-Zakura' – its name meaning 'cherry blossom from Mount Akagi' – a unique shade of pastel pink and apricot, above light green foliage (fig. 8). Comments were 'stunning plant and a new colour break'. And from Darrell Probst in 2006 is *E. g.* 'Circe', a remarkably tall form, with flowers comprising purple-red sepals covering white-tipped petals on red stems, held over



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Fig. 3 *Epimedium x rubrum*



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Fig. 4 *Epimedium x rubrum* foliage

dusky-purple young leaves (fig. 9). We suspect it is a hybrid, hence the comment 'one of the best reds, a good plant – a new US hybrid: easy, vigorous and healthy'.



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Fig. 5 *Epimedium. x versicolor* 'Sulphureum'



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Fig. 6 *E. pinnatum* subsp. *colchicum*



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Fig. 7 *E.* 'Winter's End'

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Fig. 8 *E. grandiflorum* 'Akagi-Zakura'

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Fig. 9 *E. g.* 'Circe'

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Fig. 10 *E.* 'Kodai Murasaki'

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Fig. 11 *E. acuminatum* 'Night Mistress'

Finally, we awarded an AGM to the hybrid *E.* 'Kodai Murasaki': 'reddish-purple with white spurs, a good plant' on tall (70cm), almost black stems. The flowers shine through, even though they are at the same height as the light young foliage (fig. 10). Despite having what is suspected to be *E. grandiflorum* as a parent, this hybrid seems indifferent to the pH of the soil.

Other varieties of newer, more interesting species were also given AGMs. It is important to emphasise here that nearly all of these are quite different in their habit from the garden stalwarts mentioned in the first part of this article. They are decorative plants, happy in dappled shade, but do not thrive in parched conditions. They are not 'shrinking violets' either (though as someone who has violets in their garden, I would say that is a bit of a misnomer!); they will hold their own in normal soils, and are not fussy as to pH.

I'll start with *E. acuminatum* 'Night Mistress' (fig. 11) which has enjoyed a recent and deserved rise in popularity: 'distinctive colour and an excellent form – compact dark form and a good doer – spectacular contrasting flowers'. These flowers have light dusky-pink sepals over arching, deep-purple, black-spurred petals which are larger than the species. The delicate-looking *E. fargesii* 'Pink Constellation' has ballerina-like flowers,

more intensely coloured than the species, with beautiful lilac-pink sepals flaring over spurless purple petals, with anthers and stamens pirouetting below (fig. 12). These contrast charmingly with the bronze-tinted slender young foliage: *'much admired, the public seem to like it – one of the best and sells well.'* Another new cultivar whose flowers contrast well with its young foliage is *E. franchetii* 'Brimstone Butterfly' (fig. 13): *'large attractive pale-yellow flowers, and has attractive young leaves – robust, easy and healthy'*. The young leaves are large, almost salmon-pink, ageing green.

This brings us to the hybrids, all of outstanding disposition and a long period of interest. *E. 'Amber Queen'*: *'outstanding variety, with large flower spikes – one of the most striking and floriferous'*. Introduced by Robin White, this has some of the longest flower spikes I've seen, and bears apricot sepals over cream, spurred petals that deepen to an orange mouth. The young green leaves are slightly spiny, with attractive burgundy-coloured speckling.

The unusual combination of colours of the flowers of *E. 'Domino'*, a Darrell Probst introduction in 2004, appealed to the forum too: *'floriferous with a lovely flower, and grows well in the garden and in pots'* (fig. 14). A haze of creamy-pink and

dark-rose flowers dance on tall (60cm) dark-red stems, with attractive maroon marking on the fresh green leaves. The next form, for me, is my 'Desert Island' epimedium: if I could only have one, this would be it! It's another Darrell Probst introduction, *E. 'Pink Champagne'*: *'a fabulous plant and an outstanding cultivar – distinct pink-flowered US hybrid, becoming popular – very good indeed, a vigorous plant and will repeat flower if established and happy'*. The attractive flowers are held well above the foliage, and will reliably flower for about 10 weeks. The foliage has a lovely bronze tinge when young, set off by red speckling; a beautiful combination (fig. 15).

The next two are both introductions from Koen van Poucke, and he feels they are his best work. *E. 'Red Maximum'*: *'brilliant plant, one of our favourites, very good flowers – strong, healthy and good red flowers'*. Deep cranberry-red sepals, over pale-pink petals tipped white, with a dark-pink stain to the mouth, on tall brown-pink stems held above young bronze-burnished leaves, ageing green. One of his most recent and most striking introductions, which I think will be one of the most popular, is *E. 'Royal Purple'*: *'outstanding form, grows well'*. Remarkably tall stems bear carmine-pink sepals and spurs,



Fig. 13 *E. franchetii* 'Brimstone Butterfly'



Fig. 14 *E. 'Domino'*



Fig. 15 *E. 'Pink Champagne'*



Fig. 16 *E. 'Royal Purple'*

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Fig. 17 *E.* 'Spine Tinger'

deepening to intense purple-red mouths on large flowers (fig. 16). These are borne high above mottled, pink and green young foliage.

The last and by no means least AGM in this list is another of Darrell Probst's introductions, *E.* 'Spine Tinger': '*good foliage and flowers – spiny-leaved evergreen, a reliable plant – great serrated evergreen foliage and bright yellow flowers*'. The flowers are a combination of palest lemon and deep sulphur.

While not being an unusual colour in the world of epimedium, they are held above and contrast with the fabulous foliage: attention-grabbing leaves that are long and slightly undulating, spear-shaped and spiny-edged (fig. 17).

In summary, the features that make these plants so garden-worthy are not only the length and variety of their flowering, but the beauty and interest of their foliage – increasing their value to the gardener. The forum members were

aware that we had really only scratched the surface with the varieties selected above. All of us had other good candidates for awards, which were only held back due to lack of availability. We hope next time to be able to have a full three-year trial.

I believe we shall be seeing a lot more epimediums in the future. If you would like to know more, I can thoroughly recommend Sally Gregson's very readable book referenced above. 🌸

Colin Moat has twice been a trustee of the HPS and is an active member of the Kent Group. In his 'retirement', he and his wife Cindy run Pineview Plants nursery, which mainly concentrates on shade-loving perennials; but a number of sun-lovers sneak in too. He's currently one of the assessors for the RHS *Sanguisorba* trial (started in 2018), and the RHS *Persicaria* trial (started in 2019). A full list of plant fairs they attend can be found on www.pineviewplants.co.uk