

# SUPER STAR

The award-winning daphne 'Eternal Fragrance' is a huge hit, selling out as soon as it arrives in nurseries. The breeder of this beautiful shrub, Robin White, chats with KAREN SHAW.

English plant breeder Robin White still vividly remembers working in a nursery as a young man and not only seeing, but smelling the daphnes. "It was the incredible scent of *Daphne odora* that had me hooked," he chuckles. So hooked that, decades later, this internationally recognised guru of daphnes has written a book on the subject and last year was awarded the horticultural world's highest honour – the Royal Horticultural Society's Reginald Cory Memorial Cup – for his work on daphnes.

But the sweetest reward of all for Robin and wife Sue is finally hitting the plant breeding jackpot with *D. x transatlantica* 'Eternal Fragrance'. Over the years the couple have bred hellebores, epimediums and phygelius but agree that a plant with as much promise as 'Eternal Fragrance' happens only once in a lifetime.

## Starting out

Robin inherited a love of plants from his mother, and tells the story of enthusiastically growing an enormous but totally inedible marrow when he was about five years old. He knew even then that he wanted to work with plants.

After leaving school, he started in the nursery trade, going on to enjoy horticultural study. However, a deviation into the world of landscape gardening left him feeling like "a square peg in a round hole" and he quickly realised that he missed producing and growing plants.

In 1975, as newlyweds, he and Sue took a chance on a derelict walled garden and cottage to start a nursery business. It had the added bonus of a rent-free year. "We didn't have two halfpennies to rub together," Robin recalls.



*Daphne* 'Eternal Fragrance'. Right Chris Sargent (right) from Plants Management Australia delivers a royalty cheque to Robin White at the Wisley headquarters of the Royal Horticultural Society.

*The plant has fragrant flowers over a long period and tolerates a range of soils.*

By 1984, the couple were looking for their own patch, and bought a 2ha corn field about 50km away in the village of Kilmeston, Hampshire, in south-east England. They transferred the plants pot by pot, moving the flourishing Blackthorn Nursery to its new location and their new home.

Photos: Garden World Images/courtesy of PMA/istockphoto

The couple worked around the clock in the early days, growing vegetables and soft fruit for a quick turnover, while building up stock of the hardy ornamentals they wanted to grow.

## Breeding discoveries

"The breeding really started as a hobby," Robin explains. "Handling plants every day, I would immediately spot any new mutation or sport, and it really fascinated me." Robin and Sue constantly planted seeds to see what might spontaneously appear, or worked on controlled crosses – transferring pollen from one plant to another – to try to breed better varieties.



Robin had always had a soft spot for the *D. x burkwoodii*, but believed its flowering potential and habit could be improved. He set about creating the perfect plant by crossing its forebear *D. caucasica* with *D. collina*.

Two offspring grew from the cross, and Robin selected the one with the most promising growth habit. "Once it flowered, I knew it was worth bulking up for trial, initially by grafting and then, much to my delight, by taking cuttings, which rooted easily," he explains.

Favourable trials at nurseries in England prompted Robin to apply for European Union Plant Breeders' Rights. He had to complete a detailed botanical description, and send 15 plants to the National Institute of Agricultural Botany. Here, it was assessed as being stable, distinctive and uniform over a growing season.

Plants were also sent to Europe. A sighting in a French nursery excited Chris Sargent, the managing director of Plants Management Australia. Chris saw its potential for Australia, and ordered 50 rooted cuttings. All except one survived the journey and fumigation process.

Chris describes 'Eternal Fragrance' as the holy grail of plants. It has fragrant flowers over a long period, tolerates a range of soils, can be pruned to shape, is easy to propagate and, ➤



## DID YOU KNOW?

In Greek mythology, Daphne was a nymph whose father turned her into a bay laurel tree so she could escape the attentions of the god Apollo.





↑ 1.5m ↔ 1.5m ● suitable

1



↑ 60cm ↔ 90cm ● suitable

2



↑ 20cm ↔ 60cm ● suitable

3



↑ 1.5m ↔ 1.5m ● suitable

4

## DAPHNE DELIGHT

Choose the best daphne to suit the conditions in your backyard.

### 1 Winter daphne *D. odora*

This short-lived evergreen shrub has highly fragrant flowers from mid-winter. It needs semi-shade and good drainage. It's susceptible to frost and viruses. Replace the plant every eight to 10 years.

### 2 *D. 'Eternal Fragrance'*

Flowers appear in the warmer months. It tolerates most soils, frost and drought. Plant in semi-shade or full sun. Prune to shape, if needed.

### 3 Rock daphne *D. cneorum*

This dense, evergreen low shrub has small flowers in spring. It likes semi-shade and shelter from hot summer sun, but tolerates frost. Excellent drainage is required.

### 4 Burkwood daphne *D. x burkwoodii*

Densely foliated, this evergreen or semi-evergreen shrub flowers in spring. It needs semi-shade and good drainage, and tolerates frost.

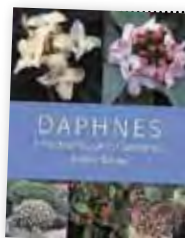
unlike the common daphne, it grows well in full sun. But it still took seven years to build up the 60,000 plants that were needed to launch it onto the retail market in 2010/2011.

Since then, the daphne has earned PMA the 2011 Australian Business Award for Best New Product. It's also cracking non-traditional Queensland markets and is now being exported back to the UK. The thing Chris is most proud of is realising Robin's dream; of taking his plant and transforming it into commercial reality.

### The future

Robin and Sue are pleased the daphne is doing well in Australia, but have no immediate plans to visit. "I'm ashamed to admit we're a stay-at-home pair," says Robin. "We have lots of plants and two crazy but beautiful English Pointer dogs, so getting away is not that easy," he adds.

They closed Blackthorn Nursery in 2008 because "we were beginning to creak a bit and wanted to focus on fewer plants". They have since been transforming the nursery into flower and vegie gardens. They are also developing more plants, including a pink form of 'Eternal Fragrance', which should hit our shores in the next year or so. And while Robin says they are slowing down, he also admits, "When plants have been in your blood for so long it's hard not to keep some dirt under your fingernails." GA



#### MORE INFORMATION

- ❁ For copies of Robin White's *Daphnes: A Practical Guide for Gardeners* (Timber Press), check in local libraries or at [amazon.com](http://amazon.com)
- ❁ Visit [pma.com.au](http://pma.com.au) for more details about 'Eternal Fragrance'.



Although Sue and Robin White have now closed their nursery in England, their plant breeding work continues, and we can look forward to more of their plants.