

Gardens

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Waterlilies: miracles that you can grow

In the cosy world of gardening, it's rare something comes along that changes everything. But for lovers of water plants, in the summer of 2007 a Thai farmer would overturn almost 100 years of entrenched dogma with a creation that many thought impossible: a hardy blue waterlily.

With their flawless translucent petals, waterlilies are among the most beautiful of all garden plants. Yet their quirky genetics mean that, unlike most garden favourites, this genus eluded the endeavours of plant breeders until just over a century ago. Right up to the late 1800s the only waterlily available to European gardeners was the white native form. Then a French horticultural genius called Joseph Bory Latour-Marliac cracked a hybridising technique whose results dramatically expanded the options available by mixing in the genes of waterlily species from North America. Pinks, yellows, oranges and reds were the result. It was his waterlilies that inspired Monet, resulting in an explosion in the plant's popularity.

However, Latour-Marliac's lifelong dream of breeding tropical waterlily species into hardy forms remained an elusive goal. As he famously took his breeding secrets with him to his death in 1911, his vision remained confined to a historical footnote. Over the course of the next century it was conventionally thought that a difference in chromosome number meant that crossing tropical and hardy waterlilies was a genetic impossibility.

So when, in 2007, Pairat Songpanich reported he had produced a perfect lavender bloom on frost-hardy plants, it



Floating by: a rare 'Siam Purple 1' waterlily – an early example of Pairat Songpanich's groundbreaking work with hybrids in Thailand

was greeted by many with sheer disbelief. Genetic tests, however, confirmed 'Siam Blue Hardy' to be the first ever proven intersubgeneric (ISG) hybrid. This first cross unleashed all manner of wonderful genetic combinations, making Thailand the world centre of waterlily breeding. Tragically, however, just four years later, a huge flood hit the region. When the waters retreated, all the 'Siam Blue Hardy' plants had been lost.

Fortunately, for gardeners in cooler

latitudes, many other hardy ISG hybrids did survive and these are now becoming increasingly available in the trade. From 'Siam Purple 1' (another one of Pairat Songpanich's early creations), whose white petals are blushed with purple at the tips, contrasting beautifully with its sulphur yellow centres, to the semi-double, deep lilac-blushed 'Queen Sirikit', this new generation of Thai cultivars is changing everything. Capturing the imaginations of collectors, some of the

brand new varieties can sell for eye-watering prices. However, the costs are falling rapidly, which means soon anyone should be able to enjoy these wonders.

Either way, growing one of these miracles of human ingenuity is less than the price of going to see a football match and to me, as a geeky gardener, there is no doubt in my mind which would bring me more joy. ■

To buy ISG hybrids, go to Latour-Marliac, Nelumbo Garden and Lilies Water Gardens

Plot 29

Gardens and summer call, no matter the mood.

By Allan Jenkins

Up early after a disturbed night's sleep, spirits low but much to do. I had wanted rest and to recuperate. My bones ache, my heart too, but gardening is therapy.

I had run out of time the night before, stuff left undone. So I am at the allotment, Monday morning before 5am, almost no one else on the road. At the gate, it is just me and the joyful chorus. My troubled world suspends, almost disappears. My breathing

and pulse rate slow. I will drift awhile in the moment.

I have trays of beans seedlings to put in next to the new poles. The sweet peas can wait for now. I had toyed with the idea of a row of single stakes, but there is something comforting about tying them all in together.

The soil is soft here at this end of the gentle slope. I work my way around the poles, five sticks wide, times two. I plant four, sometimes five seedlings for each pole, something



Ready to go: a tray of bean seedlings waiting to be planted next to their poles

of an insurance (I hope) against pigeons and slugs. And, anyway, it will be a while yet until we have too many beans. I water them in with a seaweed mix to ease the move to adulthood. I am joined by robins and blackbirds. Chatter from the trees.

By 6am I am done. I have forgotten my aches. My concerns have receded. And there is still time for a walk and a bath before breakfast. I will be back later in the week when I can steal another

hour (or three).

We still have to sort where the sweet peas will go. Many we will share with friends and family, the tomatoes, too (Howard tells me we have 'hundreds' more in his greenhouse).

Our first summer structure is up and primed. There will be beans and sweet peas. And peace of mind.

Order *Morning: How to Make Time* by Allan Jenkins, for £7.91, from [guardianbookshop.com](#)