



## Darling buddleias

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It has been too cold and wet for English gardens and too hot for Mediterranean ones. Is there anything seasonal that will grow well in them both? My answer is one of my favourite floral families: the buddleias.

Although we think we know all about them, they are not well understood by gardeners: so I have been off on some research to find out what we are missing.

We think of buddleias as tall, easy shrubs with rather coarse leaves and plumes of flower in late summer whose shades of purple or white are beloved by butterflies. The family is now on a two-year trial at the Royal Horticultural Society gardens at Wisley but for the time being I prefer to consult growers whose life is devoted to the family.

The biggest Buddleia collection in England is in the fine nursery at Longstock in Hampshire where mature specimens can be viewed outside the walled garden on any day of the week. Longstock's owners have had the good fortune to employ a buddleia fanatic and breeder, Peter Moore. He worked for years for the nearby nursery of Hilliers but his true home is Longstock's smaller enterprise, where he can attempt to improve on nature and rear new hybrids in popular families of shrubs.

Longstock is the garden and nursery of the John Lewis Partnership, lying in the grounds of its enlightened founder, the late John Spedan Lewis. Buddleias have yet to appear at the tills of its Waitrose stores but the nursery sells more than a thousand pot-grown specimens yearly.

I thought I had made an instructive study of the parent buddleias on view until I dared to interrupt Moore in his Waitrose working overalls. We spent another hour-and-a-half learning about all those I had overlooked. It included at least half of the most important specimens on the site.

There are spring-flowering buddleias, pale pink-flowered buddleias and even a Mexican form, *cordata*, which attracts flies rather than butterflies. I am about to become a buddleia bore, not least because I have now bought too many varieties and have no idea where I can fit them into my gardens.

Mainstream buddleias are very easy to look after. They like a sunny site and are unfussy about soil. Most of them are best cut down to about a foot above ground level every spring. At Longstock they are cut in late March. Beginners find that this job needs a leap of faith as the yearly top-growth of a buddleia is so luxuriant. So much so that veterans even do it with their powered hedge-clippers. The plants survive it really well and then remain at a manageable height, liberally covered in flower by August. The other essential is to keep on dead-heading them so as to treble their flowering season. Wherever we went I noticed how Moore was cutting off dead and half-dead buddleia flowers, reproaching himself for not having done so for at least two days.

In his view, gardeners are obsessed about dead-heading their roses but never think of dead-heading their buddleias. Many plants show dead brown plumes of flower among the fresh but will usually send up new, short plumes from their stems lower leaf-joints.

When dead-headed, most of the popular forms will flower on into mid-September. I recommend a daily dead-heading of the buddleias to occupy the early evening between an afternoon sleep and another cocktail – in my imagined version of expatriate life.

If your idea of the best is still an old Davidi hybrid like Royal Red or Black Knight, you are landed with coarse untidy leaves and a tall habit which is hard to fit into a decent border. At the entrance to the Longstock collection, I realised how far I had fallen behind the new age. A 5ft-high beauty called Adonis Blue was showing dark, slatey blue spikes of neat flower above tidy, slender leaves. It had been bred at Notcutts nursery in Suffolk. In front of it were the striking short white-grey leaves of Silver Anniversary.

This new buddleia stands out in a crowd and its terminal flowers of white even have a honey scent. It has been bred at Longstock by Moore himself. I bought one of each variety, thinking how well they will look in the driest part of my garden. They are both completely hardy and ought to flourish in hot gardens nearer the Mediterranean.

Buddleias are often native to dry parts of China. In Europe they colonised post-war bomb sites and the untended ground along railway lines.

If their flower spikes droop badly in heat, water the plants in the evening. They will continue to attract lovely butterflies to flowers that smell like an old-style banker's hair-oil to us but like sexy female butterfly-ettes to them.

Already at my personal limit, I asked Moore to name his top picks for keen FT readers. I got him to start with two of his own – shining white Silver Anniversary and paleish blue Summerhouse Blue.

He recommends the former for big pots as well as for the garden because when they are brought indoors they can be persuaded to go on producing scented white flowers in winter. Summerhouse Blue is taller but not coarse and is easily contained by annual pruning. It arose at Longstock as a random seedling by the tennis court, rather than as part of a breeding programme. Such are the wonders of plants in national collections, where their marriages are free and easy.

We argued about the third choice: I much like the recent Nanho Blue form which has chic leaves and good blue flowers. Moore picked Nanho Purple instead, insisting that its rose purple-pink flowers were far better when struck by late sunlight.

Camberwell Beauty is another pink-purple possibility with the agreeable habit of holding little sprays of flowers above the main plume. Many of you may know the similar habit of Dartmoor but Camberwell Beauty is less rampant. Among the whites, go for White Profusion, still the best of this class. Among the yellows with balls of flower, the best is Weyeriana Sungold.

I listened, noted and tested the flowers like a happy butterfly. Dozens more pressed to be bought.

The buddleia is now so varied and improved that it deserves to be sent fluttering out across Europe.