



### *Flower show exhibiting*

Now we have made the decision to stop doing large flower shows, we thought it might be interesting to share a few of our experiences of exhibiting over the past 26 years and hopefully give a flavour of some of the funny things that happened in the early days...



### *What a handsome trophy!*

We have very fond memories of being awarded the trophy in the photo above.

It was a very special award given anonymously, though we have a good idea who organised it. The 'inscription' reads:

*"Awarded retrospectively for the most innovative Japanese minimalist display ever seen, according to the Japanese Daily Herald".*

The year was 2004 and Robin had decided he would like to display hostas, with their roots exposed, for the season kicking off at the Harrogate Spring Flower Show.

Unfortunately we do not have any photos of the display, which Robin staged using special glass vases, which enable a plant to be displayed with the root system clearly visible below the crown. His inspiration came from researching how the Japanese like to display plants and thought it would be strikingly different and, more importantly, welcomed by the show organisers and judges alike. He couldn't have been more wrong, with one individual threatening him that if he tried such a stunt at his show, he would be thrown out!

Our fellow exhibitors enjoyed the spectacle but felt rather annoyed at the response of the various show officials so awarded Robin and



### *Floral display building*

In the early days Robin was the display builder whilst Yvonne pulled together the sales plants and displayed them on the sales tables.

This can take just as long, especially when we used to take so many different varieties to each show.

I like to feel Robin and I were a good double act when it came to display building, once we had established our working pattern. This usually meant me looking on and lending a hand whilst

Yvonne this trophy, which they proudly displayed alongside the vases on the last day of the show.

It certainly caused a stir among visitors, who put money in the trophy as a sign of their appreciation. We matched the amount put in the trophy and sent a cheque for £60 to the Yorkshire Air Ambulance.

We laugh about it still but it was indeed a sign of the times. These days, we are encouraged to be innovative to refresh the show visitor experience, so the irony is that such a display would probably be very welcome nowadays. We are only talking about 16 years ago but there are still some very entrenched attitudes to flower show displays.

### **Back to the beginning**

Back in 1993, when Robin and Yvonne decided to try their hand at flower shows, you had to serve a probationary period. Some shows had a rule that the first time you exhibit at their event, you can only sell catalogues. Some stated you had to prove yourself in an outside space for a year or two before being considered for the floral marquee, etc. These days' new exhibitors are encouraged by the RHS to attend their first RHS show with a bursary, straight into a coveted floral marquee space - how times have changed.

Not everything was fun though and the schedule was punishing with multiple shows crammed into a short season. Yvonne has written about her memories of the early days, which you can [read here](#).

### **Why attend flower shows?**

The main reason for doing the flower shows is to get your name out there and, for the first few years, it definitely was a public relations exercise as much as a steep learning curve. Robin and Yvonne didn't know anyone on the 'show circuit' to get advice from so they were very much raw recruits in the beginning.

It is something they always remembered and did much to help new exhibitors on the scene over the years. It was very touching to read some of our fellow exhibitors' memories when Robin died last year as many of them fondly recalled the help, advice and laughs they had shared.

### **I've got an idea**

One of the things that sticks with me is the amount of 'ideas' Robin and Yvonne tried out with their displays over the years. Often the ideas were very hard to recreate within the confines of a show display but that didn't stop Robin from inventing props and methods to implement his ideas, like the exposed roots concept.

When I joined in 2006 and started offering up my ideas, they were

Robin positioned everything. He would get bored and 'disappear' whilst I applied the finishing, labelling and attention to detail Robin found tediously fiddly.

When Robin and Yvonne retired from the shows, Roy and I had to build the displays and we very quickly realised it wouldn't work in the same way. Roy is as pedantic with the detail as I am but suffers from being clumsy in confined spaces. We would complete a section but then damage it trying to do the next section, so to avoid the angst of the whole finishing process, Roy became the most efficient sales table organiser instead and left the display building to me.

He was always on hand, offering plenty of encouragement and a long arm occasionally when required. He also made the best props, managing to create all sorts of display elements from elaborate screens to killer rabbits (but that's for next month).

### **Floral to educational**

Throughout the time Roy and I were doing the shows together we spent a lot of time re-evaluating how best to do the shows and decided to give educational displays a go.

Initially we thought we would just do that for a season and go back to floral displays. However, the educational displays were such a hit with show visitors that we continued staging them for the remainder of our time on the show circuit.

The move to staging educational displays meant we

often met with the comment, "we've already tried that". It didn't stop me having a go though. Sometimes they worked but sometimes I felt like giving up, especially with water features, which always found a way to leak.

When Roy joined in again, he bought his own brand of invention to play, so we had some entertaining times - more about that next month.

Giving up large flower shows was something Robin would have been very reluctant for us to do. He didn't want to retire from the show circuit at the end of 2011 and although he didn't miss the physical effort required, he never got used to missing exhibitors and customer alike.

## Trophies

Robin was very proud to have received every type of award, from all manner of shows. He was exceptionally proud of his RHS letter, received at Gardeners' World one year for an overly ambitious scheme, which didn't work due to the variety of reasons. Instead of being embarrassed and hiding it, he and Yvonne went out and bought a frame for it and displayed it on the stand throughout the show.

Awards never motivated Robin, indeed he often maintained he received more sales through "the sympathy vote".

It didn't take long for Robin and Yvonne to achieve their first Gold medal, which was at the Holker Hall Festival in 1994. The article below was written for the East Anglian Daily Times (our local newspaper). Click on the image to view larger:

Page 6 East Anglian Daily Times, Monday, June 20, 1994

**BUSINESS**

## Couple's hosta display takes the gold

**BY PETER HOPPER**

**Once a sideline now a business**

A SUFFOLK horticulturist who switched two years ago to growing hostas for amateur gardeners, has carried off a top show award.

Robin Milton and his wife, Yvonne, who run Mickfield Hostas at The Poplars, Mickfield, Snettisham, staged a gold medal display at the Great Grafton and Countryside Festival at Holker Hall, near Grange-over-Sands, Cumbria.

Their exhibit took the form of a "hosta garden" and was handicapped to include ferns, hebes and groundcover trees.

Robin, who took up wholesale vegetable growing for the London market after a career in the Navy, began an interest in hostas - a now popular foliage plant - 23 years ago when a friend gave him an unnamed hosta.

**Wanted to buy**

"I phoned in to the garden and matchmaker guy," he said. "We liked it so much that we began collecting hostas for ourselves."

"Yvonne was really the instigator of the collection and before long, friends and other people also expressed an interest and wanted to buy them."

The Miltons run a small hosta nursery as a sideline in vegetable growing, and the

took off in such a way that two years ago Robin decided to give up concentrate on hostas.

**"We are thrilled"**

Now, he has a collection of more than 500 varieties, many of them imported from the United States, where growers are acknowledged to be the best when it comes to the cultivation of hosta plants.

Mr Milton is a member of the American Hosta Society as well as the British Hosta and Hemocallis Society. He and his wife have been exhibiting at shows all over the country for the past 18 months.

"Our first real show was the Harrogate Spring Flower Show last year, when we won an RHS silver medal," said Robin.

"But we are thrilled to have won our first gold medal at the Holker Festival - it is one of the best organised shows we've been to and in a truly beautiful setting."

Last year, Robin and Yvonne, who have been married for 37 years, exhibited at 17 shows nationwide. This year their love of hostas will take them to 90 shows, on far apart in Ardingly in Sussex and the Royal Highland Show.



■ First gold: Robin and Yvonne Milton with their medal winning display at the Holker Festival

Next month we share our more recent, and favourite, show experiences.

**Speak soon,  
Team Mickfield Hostas**

could transport all the ancillary materials required on two trolleys rather than five. The extra space we freed up meant we didn't have to cram the stock trolleys, which made them much lighter and easier to move around.

## Changing times

At the same time we decided to drastically reduce the range of plants we took to the shows as it became more evident that show sales were changing. Whereas our regular customers knew we would always have more unusual and different cultivars on offer, they were not frequenting shows in the same way.

In recent years plant sales have become more of an impulse buy, so there is very little point in taking lots of varieties if we don't have the space to exhibit them as mature plants within our displays.

The displays have always been an important element of the show experience and is still, according to most show organisers, the most valued element of a flower show. Being innovative and engaging show visitors in new ways is something all exhibitors wrestle with whilst making it all look so effortless in the middle of a field in summer - how British!