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Trials are a marker of just how commercially important a plant the humble primrose is. There were three variety trials for growers to visit in England this year – how many types of plant can demand even one trial entirely dedicated to it? *John Sutton reports.*

Primroses deliver promised markets

Of the three, one was very much an English affair, with the British breeding of Vale Royal varieties proudly publicized in week-long trials at Pershore College in Worcestershire.

There was a rival event in the same week in mid-February, where breeding from across the North Sea was to be viewed at the Rudy Raes trial. Hosted by Burston Nurseries at St Albans, it was the Belgian company's second British open week, following the success of its first in 2013.

The third UK trial was by invitation to BallColegrave's premises near Banbury in Oxfordshire. Here it was mostly varieties bred by German primrose specialists Ebbing Lohaus that were on show. With a long span of flowering time across the range of series, visitors were welcomed by appointment over a period of two months.

Whether trials have any effect on the overall size of the market for primroses is doubtful, thinks veteran consultant Harry Kitchener. This is almost certainly correct, but most growers and retailers visiting them are on the lookout for varieties offering difference, especially if they can successfully be sold at a premium price in pot sizes from 10.5cm up.

At this winter's UK trials, they would have found new varieties that at the least are worth thinking about for this purpose. Examples are



BallColegrave seed manager Peter Mitchell with the new Scentsation Raspberry Ripple.

Scentsation Raspberry Ripple from BallColegrave, Woodland Rose from Rudy Raes and Vale Royal's new frilly-flowered Spring Supreme series. Other seed and young plant suppliers are able to add to their choice. Syngenta, for example, offer Sirocco and Sirocco Lilac. The Belarina series, bred by the Kerley family, commands attention for its intensely double flowers.

Growers will have been encouraged by the season now coming to its end, with the mostly mild winter helping to keep demand brisk. Many growers have been 'chasing colour' to fill

orders. Prices on the open market have mostly been well ahead of recent years. Richard Bryant's family business near Hemel Hempstead supplies independent retailers over a wide area of southern England. He told me that they had simply sold out much earlier than usual, with little staff time needed to carry out pre-sale cleaning.

Vale Royal trial

At the trial of varieties from the Vale Royal Horticultural consultancy it was partner Dave Wales and breeder Howard Lupton who were there to greet growers and retailers. Much of the plant

material had been grown just a dozen miles from Pershore by Bransford Nurseries. Managing director Geoff Caesar said that for next season he intends to add further Vale Royal varieties to the catalogue.

Other plants shown in the trial had been grown by Rowland and Mike Smith in Essex, at their Battlesbridge nurseries. And there were also some larger specimens, grown three plants together in 3.0 litre pots by Chamberlain Nurseries, based in Newent. These were samples from production for a major supermarket chain.

The emphasis in Vale Royal



Recently introduced by Rudy Raes, large-flowered shades mixture Provence in Jumbo-6 packs.

variety range is on distinctive difference from the series widely grown by high volume producers, mostly in six-packs and 9.0 cm pots. Unique colour, as in the

recently introduced Ice series, is a feature of many varieties. Flower form is important in others, as in the scented semi-double Clotted Cream and its white

counterpart Innocence, both of them also large-flowered.

Many Vale Royal varieties have the vigour to make excellent specimens in 1.0 litre pots, and some have been bred specifically with this in mind, as the six-colour Spring Titan series introduced last year. The Spring Supreme series, in five colours, is new this year. It is frilly-flowered and semi-double, and it too is seen to its full advantage in 1.0 litre pots.

Among the sixteen experimental varieties on display was a polystem-free version of the red and yellow flamed Firecracker. Other potential new varieties included a small-flowered, dark-leaved colour mix, and an attractive alternative to the popular Emily, to meet the enduring demand for 'natural-looking' primroses.

Established Vale Royal varieties that continue to please growers well, were also present at the trials, of course. These included Apple Blossom and the beautifully autumnal Ember Glow. There was also the hardy, dark-leaved Rose Passion, alongside two breeding lines, identical in all respects other than being lighter in flower colour. Likewise there were experimental colour variants for the novel late-flowering Stonewash.

Rudy Raes trial

Well over two hundred growers, some of them from Ireland, visited the Rudy Raes trial at St Albans. There were over a hundred varieties to be seen, all of them displayed at and grown by Burston Nurseries. An important feature was

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that every variety had been grown in at least two production formats, and most of them in three – 8.0 cm and 10.5 cm pots, and double-6 packs. Jumbo-6 packs were used for the vigorous Rambo (Mid) series and for the lovely large-flowered shades mixture Provence, introduced last year and enthusiastically taken up by many garden centres.

New introductions on show included the large-flowered Lipstick, deep rose-pink on a pale yellow ground colour. Flower size was also large for Woodland Rose, a new vigorous dark-leaved variety. The pack choice here was again Jumbo-6, and there were also single plants in 1.5 litre pots to show off its potential. This variety is close in plant appearance to the much-admired Woodland Walk, but greatly more vigorous and with superior seed quality. For the coming year there will be limited availability, as plug plants.

Not everything new was big. The very early, small-flowered Everlast will be one to watch for autumn sales, as the evidence is that it is

extremely hardy and capable of flowering continuously throughout the winter during spells of milder weather. It will please consumers with a preference for natural looking primroses.

The very early Primus, soon to become fully available, is the latest addition to the mainstream series for which Rudy Raes has built a reputation among growers. It has proved heat-resistant and very fast, said Rudy Raes UK agent Philip Oglesby. He believes it has a definite edge over the competition.

The early series Evie now features improvements in the original colours that have been retained, along with three new ones. Plants are a little more vigorous than previously and are better for 10.5cm pots than smaller ones. Upgrading work is also now well in hand for the mid-late Tobie series.

Among the established Raes varieties that are favourites for Philip Oglesby are the early mixes Evie Select and Ambie.

For how they looked on the day of my visit, among established varieties that impressed me were



Two of the colours in the Vale Royal Horticultural new Spring Supreme series.

Starflame Burgundy, Raesberry Rose and the widely admired Champagne White Rose.

The next British trial of Rudy Raes varieties will be

in early 2017, again at Burston Nurseries. Every year there are trials on the company's nursery near Lochristi in Belgium, and these are also visited by

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Rudy Rae's new large-flowered Lipstick.



An experimental breeding line in the variety Stonewash from Vale Royal Horticultural.



Making real money from primroses—added value seen at Meadow Croft Garden Centre in Essex.

Not quite primroses

Although in primrose trials the spotlight very naturally falls on primroses themselves, a thought to the selling possibilities of close relatives does not come amiss. The demand for polyanthus traditionally comes mainly from local authorities, especially for the hardy, open-pollinated Benary series Crescendo. Unfortunately there is a reduction in demand, arising from the trend away from seasonal bedding. Introductions do continue to come from breeders, nevertheless.

The recently introduced Stella series was among polyanthus varieties to be seen at the BallColegrave trials. This is a hardy multiflora with dark foliage, and has done well as a premium product, says BallColegrave's Peter Mitchell. So has the variety Showstopper Fire Dragon, with red and yellow flamed flowers: Sister varieties in the Showstopper series that were to be seen at his company's trials also impressed, and some of these colours will be added to the 2016 catalogue.

A polyanthus series already offered is Benary's early-flowering series Piano, also still quite new on the market. This has no vernalization requirement, so can be grown for autumn trade. It is attracting some useful supermarket attention. The SuperNova series, also large-flowered, is the polyanthus standard-bearer for Sakata. From Rudy Raes, the new multiflora variety Veristar Yellow was on show at Burston Nurseries. It is a sister for the award-winning Veristar Lemon, and both looked good in the trial.

Syngenta's Steve Waters is reporting good interest among growers in the Goldnugget series, hardy dark-leaved primrose-polyanthus hybrids in six colours.

Other primrose relatives with closely similar cultural needs of course include the Cowslip. Seed quality is a well known problem, and a big advance in addressing it is claimed for Vale Royal's simply named Royal Cowslip. There is also a useful demand for laced primulas, such as the same company's Glorious series. There is an additional colour here, Lilac:

growers from England. For those in the south-east, a day trip using Eurostar or Eurotunnel is quite practicable.

BallColegrave trials

BallColegrave's primrose and polyanthus trial was grown throughout from potting onwards in the glasshouse in which visitors saw them. Though in many respects growing conditions

were enviable – generous spacing on benches with open-mesh tops – the plants seen during January and February were simply the ones that had been in place, undisturbed, since potting into a Bulrush compost in week no 36.

Around half of the 226 primrose varieties in the main trial were listed as experimental. A select minority of these will be



Belarina variety Valentine in 12.0cm pots at a Worcestershire farm shop.

added to the catalogue, but in every case high seed quality and percentage germination will be a rigid requirement for introduction. Most of the large range of

varieties, in fourteen series, had been bred by German specialists Ebbing Lohaus. The rose-bud flowered Primlet series is from PanAmerican Seed, and

current upgrading work is under way in Chile.

There were eight new varieties, two of them – Buttercream and Blue Bicolour - further colours for the early Bonnelli series. For the late Alaska series, Blue Gem is new. The blue-striped flowers are very close in appearance to the recent early-flowering introduction Moonstone.

There are three new mid-season varieties in the mini-series Antique. These are the novel colours Silver Shadow, Pink Shades and Blueberry. And there are also three new stand-alone varieties, the red and yellow ruffle-flowered Romance, Cupid Lemon – a ‘rosebud’ variety – and Scentsation Raspberry

Ripple, a raspberry and lemon bicolour with a strong scent.

In addition to the main primrose trial, there was a comprehensive comparison of performance from a late sowing (week no 34) of the Fruelo series with Danova, Sakata’s long standing benchmark series.

All varieties in the trial were grown in 10.0cm pots. Plans for the 2015-16 trial include growing in more than one format, says BallColegrave seed manager Peter Mitchell. The aim is to meet the interests of visitors in seeing how well each variety responds to different volumes of growing medium and to different amounts of space.

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Philip Oglesby with the new variety Woodland Rose.