



Fig. 1 *Crocosmia* 'Paul's Best Yellow'

**Present-day
hardy planters
of note –
Paul Lewis
Helen Mount**

I was leafing through a glossy garden magazine recently, and I noticed an article in which a well-known garden designer was given a brief to re-design the planting for a large space, but to exclude any plants with red, yellow or orange flowers. Anyone

with such preferences should look away now, as the second in my series on hardy planters of note¹, in this case again located on the Isle of Wight, is Paul Lewis of *Crocosmia* 'Paul's Best Yellow' fame (fig. 1).

Paul works full-time in research and development for a company making wind turbines, yet somehow he manages to pack in hours of research into plant breeding too. He comes from several generations of keen amateur gardeners on the island, so his choice of pursuit isn't entirely a surprise. He remembers noticing *Curtonus paniculata* (now *Crocosmia paniculata*) in his grandmother's garden when he was a child in the 1970s. The long, pleated leaves fascinated him (fig. 2), and

he had already observed that this one was different from the crocosmias he had seen in other gardens. His great grandfather was a milkman, and Osborne House was on his round, so Paul wonders whether their *C. paniculata* might have come from there originally. Great grandfather also had an immaculate garden which Paul would visit every week, but it was the plant and bulb catalogues around the house which really caught his attention. He can still picture the illustration of a 'blue' rose in one of them – again demonstrating his eye for something a little bit different.

Paul began early; as a child he was given his own space to cultivate in the garden of his parents' home. Another interest



Fig. 2 *Crocosmia paniculata* leaves

¹ 'Present-day hardy planters of note' earlier featured Ken Hall's nerines, in the Spring 2020 issue of *THP*.

that contributed to his progression into plant breeding came from his grandfather. This gentleman successfully bred and raced pigeons, and Paul enjoyed meticulously filling in the pedigree records.

As he grew up, Paul's interest in plants developed further. He went to Portsmouth College where he studied art, then married and found he had his own house and garden to look after. Trips to RHS Wisley in the 1980s rekindled his interest in crocosmias, especially *C. x crocosmiiflora* 'Diadème', *C. x c.* 'Star of the East' and *C. x c.* 'Emily McKenzie' (figs 3 & 4). The dry corms offered for sale were, not surprisingly, too much for him to resist; he brought some back to the Isle of Wight and planted them in his garden. Over time, he undertook further research into the parentage of his plants, and started to raise seedlings. This eventually led him to holding a Plant Heritage National Collection® of crocosmias for a time, but they did not thrive in the chalky soil of his garden, and he gave it up. He also felt he'd been curating and conserving more for historical than horticultural purposes, in effect trying to prop up varieties he considered hardly worthy of selection.

Around 35 years ago Paul rented an allotment



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Fig. 3 *C. x crocosmiiflora* 'Star of the East'

in the centre of the island. His aim was to select the best qualities of promising seedlings in his crocosmia collection, and produce a plant with good yellow flowers and strong, pleated leaves similar in stature to *C.* 'Lucifer' (fig.5). *C.* 'Lucifer', as many HPS members will know, was bred by Blooms of Bressingham in the 1960s, and remains popular to this day. Paul experimented with it and with *C. paniculata* and *C. masoniorum* crosses, looking for that elusive yellow.



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Fig. 4 *C. x c.* 'Emily McKenzie'

The first three years produced nothing special – mostly orange or red and a few in between. However, several years later, in his



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Fig. 5 *Crocsmia* 'Lucifer'



Fig. 6 *C. 'Astra'* with *Panicum virgatum* 'Squaw'

own words, “better looking plants” were appearing, and when he wasn’t at work, much of his spare time was spent breeding garden-worthy varieties, selecting those with larger flowers,

pleated leaves, interesting seedheads, greater hardiness and so on. There were still more failures than successes, but I purchased one of the latter when I moved to the island around

20 years ago, before I knew Paul. This was a tall, yellow cultivar named *C. 'Astra'*, which Paul supplied for a time to a local nursery, but nowhere else. My opinion is that it’s a good plant, deserving wider circulation, and since he has seen it in flower in my garden, he is now including it in his breeding stock (fig. 6).

After reading an article on crocosmias by Bob Brown of Cotswold Garden Flowers, Paul eventually plucked up the courage to contact him, and sent some images too. This resulted in the ‘African rivers’ series coming onto the market, including *C. 'Limpopo'* (fig. 7), *C. 'Zambesi'* and *C. 'Okavango'*.

More successes followed, with *C. 'Paul's Best Yellow'* and *C. 'Hellfire'*, both of which have earned the RHS Award of Garden Merit.

Crococsmia ‘Paul’s Best Yellow’ was launched in 2007, after more than 25 years of selecting; cross-pollinating; growing seedlings on for three years; rejecting large numbers; selecting again; and repeating the process over and over. Paul considers this cultivar among his best achievements, the culmination of one of his main goals. Likewise, *C. 'Hellfire'* (one of my own favourites) which is an intense, deep red without the yellow throat of *C. 'Lucifer'*, but with pleated leaves again and flowering a bit later (fig. 8).



Fig. 7 *Crococsmia* ‘Limpopo’



Fig. 8 *C. 'Hellfire'*

In 2011 Paul met Rob Hardy of Hardy's Cottage Garden Plants at a plant fair on the Isle of Wight. Hardy was selling some of Paul's named plants and, after some discussion about his latest selections, Rob put him in touch with Walter Blom Plants BV in Holland. They put these selections into their own trials, which resulted in the 'Firestar' series of crocosmias, launched by Hardy's at the RHS Hampton Court Flower Show in 2018 (fig. 9). Paul is continuing to introduce new plants, the latest being the 'Meltdown' series (fig. 10), with bi-coloured flowers.

Paul is a forum member in the current RHS trial of crocosmias at Wisley. The trial started in July 2019, with assessments taking place periodically; the final assessment will take place in August 2022, with AGMs published at a later date.

Although crocosmias have been the primary focus of Paul's breeding programme, he has also been making selections among gladioli, including *G. nanus* species (fig. 11). As with his crocosmias, this has involved over 28 years of selection, along with the customary rejection of the vast majority of seedlings. Key attributes he looks for in his plants include a shorter stature than the larger hybrids; hardiness; smaller and longer-lasting blooms in proportion to the



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Fig. 9 One of the 'Firestar' series

leaf size; a wider colour range; and an upright stature without the need for staking. Other species and their various crosses he is evaluating include *Gladiolus papilio*, *G. x colvillei*, *G. primulinus* (now *G. dalenii*), *G. tristis* and some hybrids. These are still at an early stage of development, but a few are



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Fig. 10 One of the 'Meltdown' series



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Fig. 11 Paul's trial beds



Figs 12 & 13 Two of Paul's gladiolus selections

showing promising results (figs 12 & 13).

While parts of the Isle of Wight hardly experience frost most years, Paul's trial beds are in the centre of the island, where temperatures have dropped down to -10°C in some winters. They are also on heavy clay soils, which are

sometimes waterlogged for weeks, especially over the last three winters and the early spring of 2020 – a good test of the hardiness of both the crocosmias and the gladioli.

It is difficult to overstate the dedication and persistence required in what Paul Lewis has

achieved, especially when one considers that it has all been done in his spare time, and for little financial gain. I'm sure Paul's grandparents and great grandparents would be very proud. May his enthusiasm and hard work continue to yield him success in developing hardy, garden-worthy perennials. 🌸

Helen Mount moved from the Isle of Wight to the mainland in 2021. She is establishing a 'new' garden, which will include flowers of many different colours including red, orange and yellow.

Anyone interested in more information on the contents of this article may contact Paul via his website, www.paullewis-plantbreeder.co.uk