

A man with a shaved head, wearing a bright blue t-shirt, is smiling and looking towards the camera. He is surrounded by tall, thin-stemmed plants with clusters of small purple and white flowers. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

# Following the Midnight Star

| Ian Scroggy of Bali-Hai Nursery in Co. Antrim



| *Agapanthus* 'Blue Magic'

**Thirty years ago, *Agapanthus* was not a common sight at nurseries. IAN SCROGGY, National Collection Holder, describes its effects on growers and breeders worldwide**

The Queen Mum had more of an influence on the popularity of *Agapanthus* than she might have realised. The Australian-bred bicolour named after her – its flowers have a blue base and white tips – changed the market.

All a far cry from 1986 when I came across *A.* 'Midnight Star' and there weren't very many *Agapanthus* varieties on offer. Diana Grenfell's Apple Court Nursery in Lymington, Hampshire, offered it. She was well known for *Agapanthus* but, even so, had only 12 different cultivars for sale. 'Midnight Star' is still a favourite of mine – it's a very good plant.

**ORIGINAL THINKING**

*Agapanthus* is a rhizomatous perennial from southern Africa. I have 7 species and 456 cultivars in my reference collection. Most are from the breeders' original stock or from the closest source. They range from

*A.* 'Thumbelina', which is 10cm high, to *A. orientalis* 'Big White', which can grow to 2m. I have many varieties that have long since disappeared from commercial horticulture.

Maintaining the genetic pool of the plant is essential. As breeders move plants farther and farther away from their origins, they can lose vigour and resistance to pests and diseases.



| *Agapanthus* 'Cloudy Days'

**COSTLY BUSINESS**

Propagation is done by division or, more commonly, by tissue culture. It's a very expensive process. I get it done in Sri Lanka and Spain. I also work with Ros Smith, the expert at Duchy College Rosewarne who does a lot with Plant Heritage. You use growing tips (the top 3mm) or flower buds, which means that work can be done only once a year.

‘It’s a Victorian myth  
that *Agapanthus* need  
to be root-bound’

There are benefits and downsides to tissue-cultured plants. Some of the newer varieties are produced by growers who put too much gibberellic acid in the agar so that, although they grow away very strongly, the effects of the gibberellin are lost by the third year, and they lose their size and don't necessarily survive.

**PERFECT HAVEN**

My *Agapanthus* and *Hosta* National Collections are held at my nursery, Bali-Hai, in Carnlough, Co. Antrim.



*Agapanthus* 'Charlotte'

**GETTING THE BEST FROM YOUR AGAPANTHUS**

- *Agapanthus* can live for 60 to 70 years;
- They need a cold spell from 0°C to 5°C to produce their best flowers (keep only the evergreen non-hardy plants in the conservatory or under protection);
- They are very heavy feeders – give them tomato feed at half dose and seaweed extract from May until the first week in August (no later or they will be prone to frost damage);
- Decrease watering dramatically after August, they are very drought tolerant;
- Underwater them when they're young – if you get the roots too wet, they rot;
- Divide them every 3 to 5 years;
- They do best in a clay or peaty soil – don't put sand or grit in the mix, it stunts the roots;
- It's a Victorian myth that they need to be root-bound.

It's 35 miles north of Belfast in an enclosed bay in a glen that is 3°C warmer than the surrounding area and it's also just half a mile from the sea, so offering protection from severe frosts.

The Collection is grown in pots. This site was a potato farm 60 years ago and although there was no known potato cyst nematode here, it's not worth taking the risk because I send a lot of material around the world and the presence of PCN would stop that.

**WORLD WIDE WEB**

*Agapanthus* appeals to breeders – one Belgian breeder, Ignace van Doorslaer, who started breeding hostas and then *Agapanthus*, sadly passed away last year. Growers and breeders, who number more than 100, are a close-knit community – the internet has made it



*Agapanthus* 'Blue Magic'

easy to keep in touch across the world. We're all interested in each other's work. I get sent photographs of new unnamed varieties asking whether I think they are worth marketing or not.

### SHARING IS CARING

As the reference Collection Holder, I am asked for material. Japanese breeders love *A. inapertus* varieties, the Italians prefer semi-evergreen, Americans like whatever's new and they're developing patio plants, while in New Zealand they are working towards sterile flowers because *Agapanthus* have become an invasive weed. I also run my own

trials. At the moment I'm looking at 13 French varieties for growth habit, flowerheads, to see how strong they are, their roots, etc.

It's important for collection holders to share plants so as to have a good back-up in case of losses. I sell plants to other collection holders and they sell to me; when Dick Fulcher, from Cornwall, retired I received some of his original collection. You don't want to be in the position where there's only one plant left, like *A. 'Jersey Giant'*. It's English bred and as far as I know I have the only one. I'd love to know if anyone else has it . . .

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Agapanthus* 'Black Magic'
- *Agapanthus* 'Charlotte': for repeat flowering this is the best dwarf evergreen
- *Agapanthus* 'Blue Magic': hardy down to -20°C
- *Agapanthus* 'Blitza': new evergreen white flowers, up to 1.2m
- *Agapanthus* 'Allisio': a wonderful blue
- *Agapanthus* 'Blue Ice': evergreen; each individual floret changes colour from bright blue at base to a cool blue-tinted white
- *Agapanthus* 'Twister': excellent bicolour forms, deciduous, 50cm
- *Agapanthus* 'Queen Mum': evergreen, good bicolour