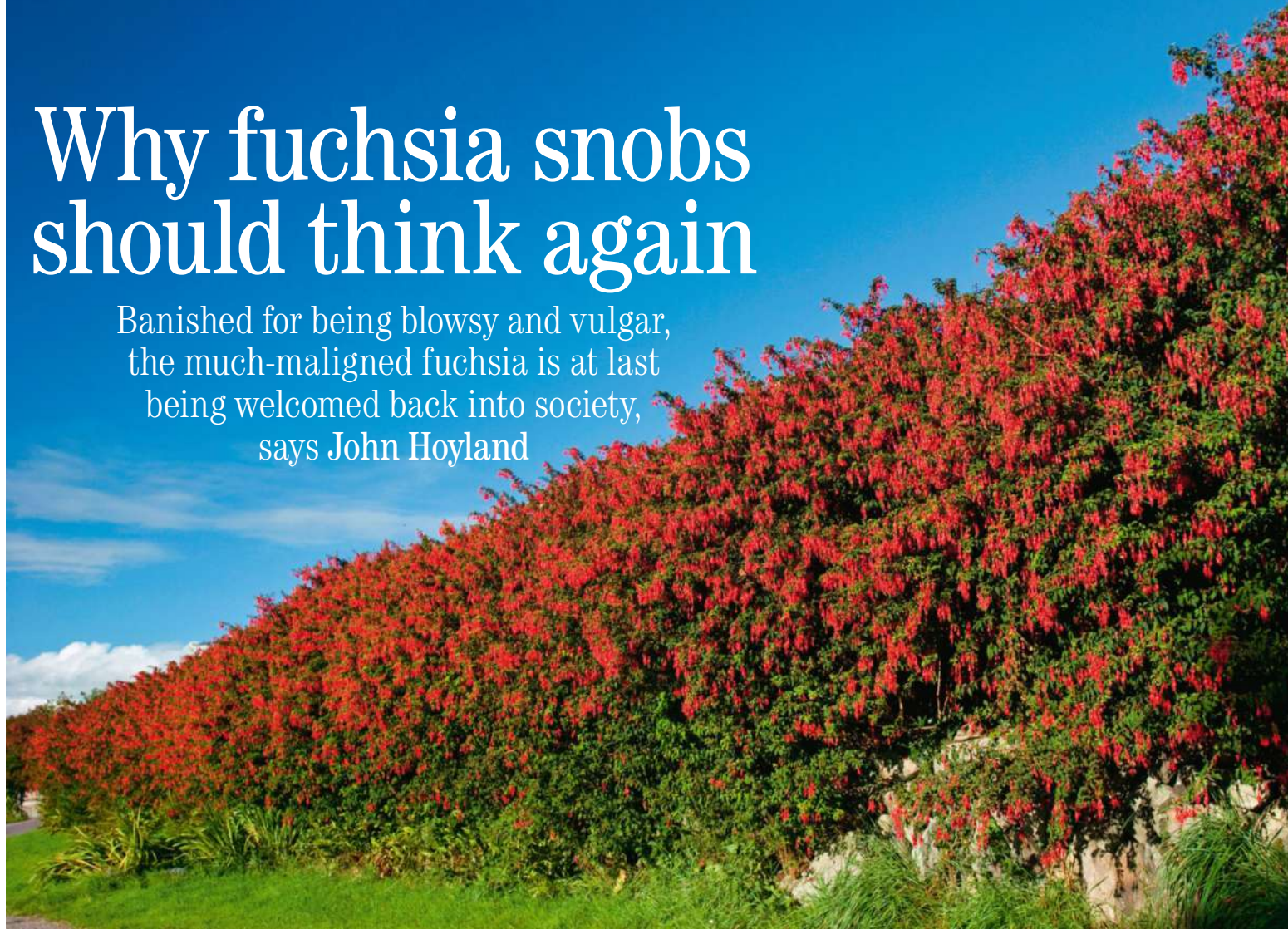




# Why fuchsia snobs should think again

Banished for being blowsy and vulgar, the much-maligned fuchsia is at last being welcomed back into society, says John Hoyland



A flaming hedge of *Fuchsia magellanica* 'Riccartonii', which thrives in the warmth of the Gulf Stream areas, in Co Cork, Ireland

WHEN gardening friends tell me that they cannot abide pelargoniums or that they would never allow gladioli into their borders or that begonias are far too vulgar for their garden, my response is always the same: they don't know the family well enough and I can guarantee that there is at least one plant that will soften their stone hearts.

The same goes for fuchsias. Often dismissed for having baroque flowers in gaudy colours, among the 100 or so species and the thousands of cultivars and hybrids, there are ones that will sit comfortably in any garden. If you find the more ostentatious hybrids too garish, then look to the elegance and simplicity of the species; on the other hand, if you think the modesty of the species more suited to a botanic garden, you will be overwhelmed by the range of showy, hybrid examples.

Fuchsias are mainly native to South America and include plants only a few inches tall, as

well as shrubs that reach 12ft high. There is even, in the genus, a tree that grows to 30ft. The flowers consist of a group of petals that form a tube covered, in bud, by four long sepals. In most wild species, the sepals are red and the petals purple, colours said to be most attractive to the hummingbirds that pollinate the flowers. It is the peculiar structure and bicoloured aspect of the flower that breeders have exploited to develop flamboyant hybrids.

**‘Purple and red are the most attractive to hummingbirds’**

At the demure end of the spectrum, *Fuchsia splendens* is covered in summer with narrow, inch-long tubular flowers that are a rich pink with green tips. In the autumn, the flowers are replaced by deep-purple berries. This is not a plant that shouts, but it is one that is reliably floriferous from July to September. The berries, as are those of many of the species, are edible and are said to have a tangy, lemony flavour, although the only time I tried tasting some, I had to spit them out, so I can't vouch for the taste of any of them.

Often used in Edwardian bedding schemes and now becoming popular in exotic gardens, *Fuchsia arborescens* is an upright shrub with glossy, evergreen leaves. The pale-mauve flowers grow in tight clusters that resemble lilacs. *Fuchsia paniculata* is a similar shrub, reputed to be slightly hardier. Both will get to about 4ft tall in a good summer, whereas *Fuchsia procumbens* never grows taller than a few inches. It is a prostrate plant with small, heart-shaped leaves and cream flowers with green sepals that face upwards. Look closely and you will see that the flowers are dotted with bright blue pollen.

It is hard to comprehend that there is a line that connects these species to plants such as *Fuchsia* 'Voodoo', which has flowers 4in across formed by a tangle of dark-purple petals topped with bright red sepals—not a colour combination for the faint-hearted. The plant is part of a group marketed as 'Giant Fuchsias' that includes the even larger magenta-and-pink flowers of *Fuchsia* 'Bella Rosella', which both sounds and looks like a floral drag queen. These are extravagantly over-the-top flowers, the Ascot hats of the flower world: they make you smile and marvel at their exuberance, but you wouldn't want to see them everywhere. ➤

Facing page, clockwise from top left:

Elegance personified: delicate *Fuchsia* 'Clair de Lune'; *F.* 'Thalia' will need to be overwintered in a warm greenhouse; *F.* 'Hawkshead' is hardy in much of the country; *F. magellanica* 'Riccartonii'





Above: *Fuchsia boliviana* in its native Peru. The flowers can be 4in long. Below left: *F. splendens* flowers from July to September, with edible purple berries to follow. Below right: It would be easy to mistake the clustered blooms of *F. arborescens* for lilacs

Other than in extremely mild and sheltered parts of Britain, most fuchsias are not hardy and need to be overwintered in a frost-free greenhouse or treated as annuals. The few that take British winters in their stride are valuable shrubs: they tend to be floriferous, long-flowering and adaptable to a variety of conditions. *Fuchsia magellanica* has masses of dark-pink and purple flowers throughout summer. It thrives in the warm, moist climate created by the Gulf Stream and has become naturalised in the west of Ireland, south-west Scotland, Devon and Cornwall.

‘The few that take British winters in their stride are valuable shrubs,’

The cultivar most often used for hedging is *Fuchsia magellanica* ‘Riccartonii’, which has crimson sepals that almost obscure the small purple petals. Several hardy fuchsias have coloured foliage that contrasts with, and sometimes clashes with, the flowers. *Fuchsia* ‘Genii’ has lime-green leaves and, on *Fuchsia* ‘Sunray’, leaves are a variegated cream and green with a pink flush.



In general, the hardier fuchsias will thrive in sun or partial shade on soil that doesn’t suffer the extremes of being either too wet or too dry. In general, the plants will make rounded shrubs that reach 3ft–4ft tall, but *Fuchsia* ‘Lady Boothby’ can grow to 9ft and is known as the climbing fuchsia. It does not cling by itself and has to be tied into a trellis



or trained along wires, but it is a magnificent sight during the summer months.

As with most aspects of gardens, which colour or which style of fuchsia attracts you is a matter of personal preference. Whether your taste leans towards the discreet or veers towards the gaudy, be assured that there is a fuchsia that is perfectly suited to you. 🐌





## Six to admire

### ***Fuchsia 'Hawkshead'* (above left)**

A deciduous shrub of about 3ft with small leaves and slender, green-tipped white flowers dangling from arching stems. This is an elegant fuchsia that is hardy in most of Britain if it is not planted in cold, wet soil

### ***Fuchsia 'Annabel'* (above middle)**

A fuchsia that looks best in pots or window boxes, where the weight of the flowers seems to pull down the stems. Although the form of the flower, with its tube of folded petals and its curled back sepal, looks elaborate, the soft pink colour saves it from appearing over-fussy



### ***Fuchsia boliviana* (above right)**

A fast-growing shrub with long, deep-red flowers that hang in tassels. It is not hardy outdoors, but can be grown as a conservatory plant where it will flower most of the year. Outdoors, it will reach 3ft, but indoors it can be pruned to the height you prefer

### ***Fuchsia 'Thalia'* (below left)**

An upright plant that will grow to about 2ft, with large, dark, olive-green leaves that make a fine background to the bright, orange-red flowers. It doesn't start flowering really well until August, but continues through the autumn. It is not hardy outside in Britain, but can be overwintered in a heated greenhouse



### ***Fuchsia 'Mrs Popple'* (below right)**

Found in a Stevenage garden a century ago, this plant's enduring popularity is explained by its vigour, upright habit, hardiness and abundant flower production. The purple and red flowers appear in early June and are still being produced in October. This is a good variety for making a hedge

### ***Fuchsia 'Ffion'***

The contrast between the pale-pink sepals and the reddish-purple, almost magenta petals, make for a sparkling flower. The plant has a trailing habit, so is best used for bedding out in pots and windowboxes. This is a modern hybrid, introduced at the turn of the century and named in honour of Ffion Hague

