



Trumpet majors

The magnificent new glasshouse display at West Dean, West Sussex, shows why it's time that hippeastrums came in from the cold, says John Hoyland

Photographs by Clive Nichols





THE ultimate degradation for plants is to find themselves being sold on a service-station forecourt: chrysanthemums in a cellophane shroud, over-fed cyclamen in foil baskets and, at this time of the year, glittery boxes of dried-up amaryllis bulbs. These bulbs are not even named correctly: true amaryllis are South African plants, hardy in much of the UK, with a brief, but beautiful flowering in the autumn. What are being sold and what, to the irritation of botanists, we all refer to as amaryllis, are, in fact, *hippeastrum*. The name was changed in the late 1980s, but most people—growers and breeders included—continue to refer to the plant by its former name. Perhaps a first step in liberating the ‘amaryllis’ from its shelf at the service station might be to call it by its correct moniker.

Few plants are as flamboyant as *hippeastrum*: floriferous and long flowering, they would be welcome at any time of year, but to have their exuberance during the dull grey days of winter seems almost miraculous. It is unfathomable that such a plant is dismissed, in some quarters, as old-fashioned or disparaged for being too ostentatious.

‘Like orchids, *hippeastrum* have an unreal, out-of-this-world aura’

Most *hippeastrum* are hybrids, selected for their bright colours or the shape of the blooms. Red, trumpet-shaped flowers are the most widely available, but breeders have recently begun to introduce a broader range of colours, often with a contrasting picotée edge to the petals and flowers up to 9in wide. *Hippeastrum papilio* is a species that has been used as the parent to a group known as Butterfly *Hippeastrum*. It has flowers of cream-coloured pointed petals with a chartreuse throat and long stamens. The petals are striped in burgundy and appear to be hand painted. This species is also one of the parents of the so-called Spider flowers, which have narrow petals that curl as they age.

The most extravagant flowers are on the double form, which has an extra row of petals so that it resembles an overblown rose and looks far too heavy to be supported by its slender stems. Like orchids, all the types of *hippeastrum* have an unreal, out-of-this-world aura, but they are easy to grow, with none of the elaborate nurturing that orchids need.

Tom Brown, head gardener at West Dean Gardens in West Sussex, is a *hippeastrum* enthusiast. Searching for plants that would →



Preceding pages: Recent breeding has greatly increased the variety of *hippeastrum* colours and forms available. Their floriferousness and longevity make them ideal indoor plants. *Facing page:* *Hippeastrum* ‘Exotic Nymph’, with pots of auricula and lachenalia. *Above:* *H.* (Diamond Group) ‘Fairytale’ has lovely red-striped flowers with a lime throat

How to grow

Pot the bulbs in a container about 1in wider than the bulb. In flower, *hippeastrum* can be top heavy, so select a terracotta or ceramic pot, rather than a lightweight plastic one

Use a well-drained compost: a peat-free John Innes No 2 with extra grit is ideal. Leave the top quarter of the bulb above the surface of the soil. Adding a layer of horticultural grit to the surface of the compost looks attractive and helps keep moisture away from the crown of the bulb

Place in a bright spot, away from direct sunlight. Water sparingly until shoots start to appear and then increase the watering so that the compost does not dry out, probably about twice a week.

When in flower, feed with a liquid fertiliser once a week, too

Turn the pot occasionally so the flower stems do not lean towards the light. Stake them by tying them loosely to canes sunk into the side of the pot (dogwood stems are ideal) or use purpose-made metal supports

After flowering, cut the stems down to the base and continue to water the plant. Move the pots outdoors from late spring and stand them somewhere away from direct sunlight. Continue watering until September and then stop, so that the soil dries out, and then bring them into a frost-free greenhouse or cold frame. The leaves will yellow and wither

After eight to 10 weeks, pot up the bulb in fresh soil and start watering. It will start into growth again and begin producing flowers



Tom Brown's favourites

Growing 60 varieties of hippeastrum gave the West Dean gardener the chance to observe them closely. Among his favourites are:

***Hippeastrum* (Spider Group) 'Evergreen'**

One of the 'Spider' type of hippeastrum with narrow petals that are a pale lime-green, with a darker-green band down the centre. An elegant plant, increasingly grown as a cut-flower and popular with chic florists

***Hippeastrum* (Galaxy Group) 'Grand Diva'**

A modern variety chosen for its eye-catching, deep-red flowers that are about 8in wide. It blooms prolifically, often producing four flower stems from a single bulb

***Hippeastrum* (Galaxy Group) 'Pink Surprise'**

There is nothing demure about these dazzling blooms, in a shade that used to be described as 'shocking pink'. The surprise may refer to the startling flowers, but could equally apply to the plant's height, a good 6in taller than most hippeastrum

***Hippeastrum* (Diamond Group) 'Lemon Star'**

This has a reputation for reliably re-flowering in subsequent years. One of the first hippeastrum to flower with the cool fresh colour of spring, it is the parent of many similar hybrids

***Hippeastrum* (Spider Group) 'Emerald'**

An odd name for a variety that is more red than green. The narrow, twisted petals form a spidery flower that has a pale-green background overprinted with narrow crimson stripes

***Hippeastrum* (Double Galaxy Group) 'Exotic Nymph'**

One of the more ostentatious varieties, with flowers made up of several rows of petals. The salmon, almost orange, colour of the flowers sets it apart from other hippeastrum

Clockwise from top left: The selection of 60 different varieties of hippeastrum trialled in the gardens of West Dean includes: 'Evergreen'; 'Grand Diva'; 'Lemon Star'; 'Exotic Nymph', 'Emerald Star' and 'Rosalie'



Above: Come March, Hippeastrum 'Green Valley' (far left) and 'Tres Chic' (centre) are joined by hyacinths, narcissus and lachenalia in a brilliant display. Below: West Dean's head gardener Tom Brown with one of his favourite forms, Hippeastrum 'Exotic Nymph'

brighten the estate's magnificent greenhouses during the winter and early spring, he decided that hippeastrum met his requirements perfectly. Last winter, with the help of a specialist bulb nursery, he acquired 60 different varieties that are mainly in flower during the early part of the year. He also wanted plants that were long lived, 'something more sustainable than

‘The effect in the first year of flowering was impressive. “Everyone was blown away by their beauty and their variety”’

tulips, which are basically annuals and have to be replaced each season'. The effect in the first year of flowering was far more impressive than even Mr Brown had anticipated. 'It was amazing,' he says. 'Everyone was blown away by their beauty and their variety.'

Although hippeastrum are most often associated with Christmas, the spectacle at



Stockists

Bloms Bulbs, Bedfordshire
(www.blomsbulbs.com)

Farmer Gracy
(www.farmergracy.co.uk)

BULBi (www.bulbi.co.uk)

West Dean lasted several months, peaking in April. In general, bulbs will flower six to eight weeks after they are planted, but many factors influence flowering and some will take 10 weeks. If a bulb is not producing flowers, be patient: I have known flowers suddenly appear after three months of waiting.

At Christmas and New Year, there are few other plants that can be grown alongside hippeastrum, but only a few plants grown together will, at this time of year, feel like a tropical forest. As the season progresses, companions begin to appear. On the West Sussex estate, where the plants are being grown again this winter, Mr Brown adds pots of hyacinths and daffodils, followed by tulips and other spring-flowering bulbs. The bright flowers of the hippeastrum tower above the other bulbs, bringing height and vibrancy to the display.

Garden centres often sell hippeastrum as ready-flowering plants, frequently sprinkled with glitter or tied up with tinsel, but plants as showy as these need no additional ornamentation. Grown singly, in groups or, as at West Dean, with the companionship of forced spring bulbs, they are guaranteed to enliven even the bleakest days of winter. 🌸
Visit www.westdean.org.uk