



Try something new

Foreign introductions are always tempting to grow—and so often disappoint—but, writes **John Hoyland**, the Australian baptisia is proving hardy and happy in a range of conditions here and becoming a new garden stalwart

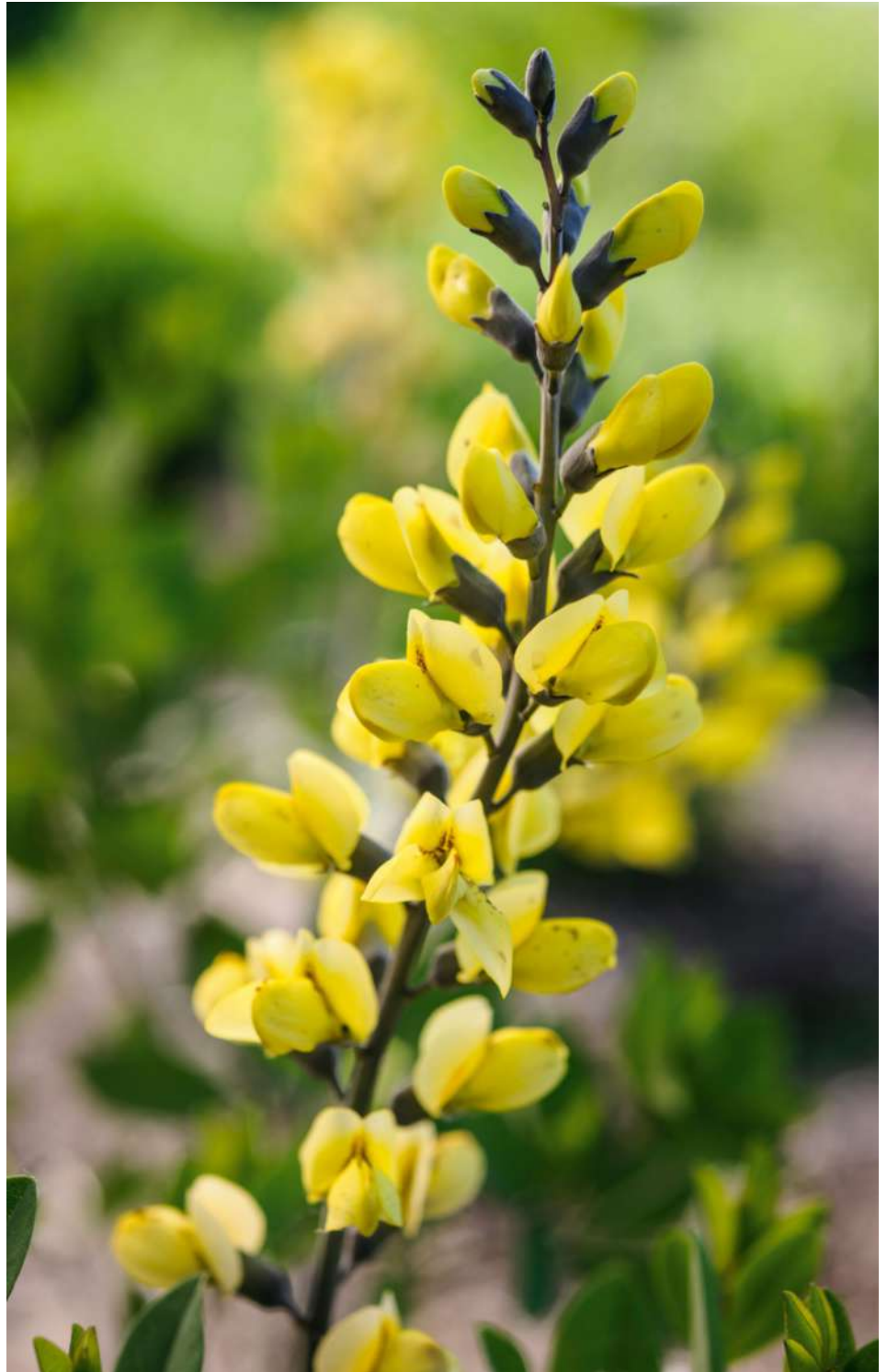
THE desire for things novel and innovative is as strong in the world of gardening as it is in the world of fashion. Garden centres rely on finding new and tempting varieties to keep customers coming back to buy more plants. Even the most humble garden plants have been the subject of breeding programmes aimed at producing bigger, bolder and more colourful blooms.

A couple of decades ago, many gardeners were captivated by the range of coneflowers—*Echinacea*—that started to emerge onto the market. After being available only as a muddy pink or a dirty white, here were cultivars with orange, yellow, bright red and sparkling white flowers. We all rushed out to acquire these wonderful new plants, but disenchantment quickly set in as we discovered that many of the plants were temperamental weaklings that expired after a few seasons. Most gardeners know that tried-and-tested varieties—‘good doers’, as nursery-woman Beth Chatto used to call them—are probably best for our gardens, but new temptations can prove irresistible.

‘These are plants that are fast becoming the next generation of good doers’

Plant breeders have now turned their attention to another unassuming plant—baptisia. As are echinaceas, these are plants of the American prairies, but, unlike their cousins, baptisia are tough, undemanding plants and their robust traits are ensuring that the new hybrids will be long-lasting and not in need of mollycoddling. These are plants that are fast becoming the next generation of good doers.

There are about 17 species of Baptisia, all of them native Americans, that in the wild grow in grassy, open areas, sometimes in the shade of deciduous trees. In general, they range in height from 2ft to 4ft, but in the wild, on particularly rich soils, can grow to as tall as 6ft. A member of the legume family, the flowers have the pea-like shape typical of ➔



Facing page: The dusky-cinnamon flowers of *Baptisia* ‘Cherries Jubilee’ are followed by handsome black seed pods. *Above:* *B.* ‘Lemon Meringue’ comes slowly into bloom with muted purple buds on charcoal stems that burst into glorious yellow flowers





Cultivation tips

A well-drained soil in full sun is the ideal situation. Although tolerant of most soils, baptisias will not grow on soil that gets waterlogged

Incorporate lots of compost or manure into the planting hole to ensure they get off to a good start

Because baptisias do not like to be overcrowded, particularly in their first couple of years, leave space around them so that they have room to develop

Carefully consider where you want them to grow. Their long tap roots means they are difficult to move

the genus. The petals at the base of the flower, known as the keel, are occasionally a different colour to the rest of the flower.

For years, we have been contented with *Baptisia australis*, happy to see its spikes of indigo flowers in early summer. After the flowers fade, the plant has a second flush of growth that forms a dome of glaucous foliage, bringing structure and stability to the border. Hidden within the foliage are black seed pods that resemble broad beans and, when rattled, sound like mini maracas. Although it is a herbaceous perennial, the foliage has a tough, shrubby quality and continues valiantly until hard frosts knock it back.

Part of the appeal of baptisia is that they can thrive on poor, dry soil, as well as on rich loam. They are at home even on the inhospitable chalk soils of the South Downs. The whole genus is slow to establish, and it may take a couple of seasons to grow into a decent-sized plant, but, once settled in, they will, like peonies, flourish for decades.

‘Baptisia can thrive on poor, dry soil, as well as on rich loam’

The best of the new hybrids result from the work of a pair of Hans: Hans Hansen in the US and Hans Kramer in the Netherlands. Mr Hansen first saw the potential of baptisia when botanising in Texas and Oklahoma and embarked on a complex breeding programme that focused on producing compact plants that hold the flowers high above the foliage. From the narrow range of colours of the wild species, he has bred plants with blooms that run through pinks, maroons, dark purple →

Baptisia australis ‘Exaltata’ planted in a border with copper bracts of *Bupleurum longifolium* and opium poppies

and forms with bi-colour flowers. His plants are marketed as the 'Decadence' series.

From his small specialist nursery in the Netherlands, Mr Kramer has sown thousands of baptisia seeds and selected seedlings with large flowers in deep hues, encompassing blues and whites, as well as mahoganies, browns and pinks. Many have bi-coloured flowers, where the keel is either a contrasting or a complementary colour to the rest of the flower. The variety of shades is such that he likens the moment when seedlings first flower to peering into a sweet shop.

‘Watching seedlings flower is like peering into a sweet shop’

Being prairie plants, baptisia are happy in contemporary naturalist planting schemes where their dense domes can act as a foil to other, airier prairie natives, such as veronicastrums, heleniums and coneflowers. They have a long season of interest, from the emergence of the first shoots through the flowering of early summer to the bold seed pods of autumn. In more conventional herbaceous borders, plants can be clipped after flowering to emphasise the shape and solidity of the plant, although this does sacrifice the seed pods.

Mr Hansen continues to hybridise baptisia, to create even more colour diversity, develop later-flowering hybrids and explore different foliage types. In the imagination of the plant breeder, the best is always still to come. 🌱



Above: *Baptisia australis* 'Caspian Blue' produces flowers for a long time. Below: Once established, *B.* 'Purple Smoke' can reach 3ft, with flowering stems extending for 1ft



Ones to try

***Baptisia* 'Purple Smoke' (left)** Thanks to micropropagation techniques, this hybrid has become widely available in gardens and nurseries in a very short time. Part of its appeal are the dark flowering stems, which on mature plants grow about 1ft long. The violet flowers have a grey sheen, which gives them the smoky quality referenced in the name. Established plants grow to about 3ft tall

***Baptisia* 'Brownie Points'** An unusual colour combination of caramel flowers with yellow keels on stems that grow to about 1ft long. The hybrid is distinguished by its long flowering period: several weeks in May and June, during which the colour of the flowers does not fade

***Baptisia australis* 'Caspian Blue'** A cultivar with lavender-blue flowers on stems that grow to 1ft long. The flowers are not as densely packed along the stem as they are on modern hybrids, but the plant

produces flowers over a long period. I have seen seedlings for sale under this name whose blooms, when they flower, may not have the same delicate colouring, so buy it from a reputable nursery

***Baptisia* 'Golden Chestnut'** Selected by Hans Kramer from hundreds of seedlings for its large flowers and striking colour. The deep-maroon flowers have a glossy shine on the petals and a distinct yellow keel. It takes several seasons to reach maturity

***Baptisia* 'Lemon Meringue'** This plant starts to flower in a low-key way with muted purple buds on charcoal stems, but then erupts into vibrant yellow flowers. As the season develops, there are stems in bud and others in full flower, giving a two-tone effect. It will grow to about 1ft tall

***Baptisia* 'Sparkling Sapphires'** A low-growing, bushy hybrid that forms a dense mound about 2ft tall. Each plant produces dozens of flower spikes with intense violet-blue flowers. Bred by Hans Hansen, it is marketed as part of his 'Decadence' range