

Purple and white  
bicoloured flower spikes  
rise above divided leaves  
on lupin 'King Canute'.

# Candles of Colour

Lupins are nostalgic cottage garden plants that are now the height of fashion once again. At Westcountry Nurseries in Devon, **Sarah Conibear** continues the long tradition of breeding and developing these brightly coloured perennials

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**T**here is something nostalgic about lupins. Perhaps it's their association with cottage gardens and idyllic pastoral planting, or long-held memories of their vibrant colours and peppery scent, often discovered during childhood in a grandparent's garden. There is something old-fashioned about these plants, with their sturdy flower spikes in unabashedly bold colours, yet at the same time they're riding a wave of fashion – in recent years, they've been the stars of many a Chelsea show garden. Whether you care about fashion or not, add lupins to your late-spring and early-summer borders, and you can be sure of a colourful show.

Sarah Conibear was head gardener at Clovelly Court in north Devon when lupins first captured her attention. She had watched a gardening programme



**Top** 'Manhattan Lights', one of the most popular bicoloured cultivars. **Above** Sarah Conibear breeds and sells lupins at Westcountry Nurseries.

on television, featuring the lupin collection of Johnny Walker. Sarah contacted him and the pair became friends, with Johnny sending her the seeds of his best strains, leading to the creation of Westcountry Nurseries. Now Sarah's nursery, specialising in lupins as well as other plants, is a TV star in its own right, her lupins, in bright displays, stealing the limelight in Chelsea's floral marquee whenever she exhibits, and forming the basis of a breeding programme that has given rise to many fine varieties. "I always fancied running my own nursery," she says, "and when I saw the lupins I was just really struck by them."

Neither Johnny nor Sarah would have been able to grow such impressive lupins were it not for the efforts of one man, however: George Russell. His name is synonymous with this plant and his story has gone down in the annals of gardening history. Russell was a gardener in York, who, on seeing a vase of cut lupins in the home of his employer, a Mrs Micklethwaite, determined that he could improve the plant. He sent for seed from every supplier he could find, and grew the resulting plants on two allotment plots at Bishopthorpe Road in York.

There followed a ruthless programme of selection. Every year, Russell, by then in his mid-fifties, gathered the seed that had resulted from natural bee pollination and grew the offspring, weeding out any plants that didn't come up to his exacting standards – any with blue flowers (the default), any that weren't perennial, any weak plants with weedy, gappy flower spikes. Twenty years later, aged 79, Russell had achieved his aim, and showed his new, improved lupins at the Royal Horticultural Society's Chelsea Flower Show to great acclaim. The plants had straight, sturdy stems, evenly covered in perfectly formed flowers with no gaps between them, plus there was a brand new range of bicolours. Everyone wanted to grow them, but Russell wouldn't sell his plants or seed, despite many lucrative offers.

Eventually, before Russell's death at the age of 96, James Baker, a nurseryman from Wolverhampton, persuaded Russell to let him propagate the plants



**Clockwise from top left**  
Custard yellow 'Desert Sun'; early-flowering 'Persian Slipper'; pure white 'Polar Princess'; vibrant 'Tequila Flame'.



and make them available commercially. In return, Russell was given a cottage on site, and Arthur Heard, the son of a neighbour who had helped Russell with the work required on his York allotment, was

given a job. In its post-war heyday, Baker's nursery attracted thousands of people who wanted to see its 40 acres of lupins in flower, and practically every lupin growing in a garden anywhere in the country was a Russell lupin, the seed coming in distinctive packets featuring Russell himself.

Sadly, this success didn't last. Baker's nursery, which had been one of the biggest employers in the area, eventually closed and the lupins growing on the site all but vanished. Because lupins don't come true from seed, over time the quality of strains of the plants sold as Russell lupins inevitably dropped, due to a lack of vigorous reselection and maintenance of the parent plants. Propagating vegetatively using basal cuttings was the best way to maintain the quality, but problems with viruses on stock plants meant that this was soon ineffective, too. Luckily, some lupins with qualities close to Russell's originals survived – Johnny Walker's collection for example. When Sarah Conibear started growing lupins using Walker's seed, it was a great head start in her mission to re-establish them as the sturdy, exotic-coloured, garden-worthy plants Russell had known.

"Russell developed the lupin that we know today and mine are bred from those. Our lupins are our own, the next generation on from Russell's, but originally using the Russell brand seed," she explains. "We have been ruthless and selective – not much has got past the compost heap." Lupins with spikes of one pure colour, or new colour combinations for bicolors are among her aims. "We're looking to improve on what we've got, so we're still looking for a completely red one, and a completely blue one – they always tend to have a little fleck of white in the keel [the bit of the flower that stands up inside the lower, outer wing petals]. A dark purple, almost black would be nice."

No matter how exciting the colour of a potential seedling, the plant itself must meet strict criteria if it is to proceed. "It has to be a strong, stocky plant with a thick flower stem, and the flower spike needs to be full so you can't see the stem between the bells," Sarah explains. "The foliage must be good quality, and it needs to be a vigorous garden plant."

Her breeding programme has resulted in amenable plants that make for great borders. Their pleated palmate leaves are up early in spring, often prettily decorated with raindrops and dew. The foliage makes a lush emerald-green foil for bulbs such as

**Left** Cut lupin blooms early in the morning and put them in water straight away to extend their vase life.

**Bottom left** 'Red Rum' has an impressively long flowering season.

**Bottom right** Pink and white 'Rachel de Thame'.

GROWING ADVICE

# Cultivating lupins

Follow Sarah Conibear's advice to grow statement lupins in your garden's borders

● **STAKING** Varieties such as the named cultivars Sarah sells, with sturdy stems and strong growth, shouldn't need staking. Weaker seed-raised varieties may need support to prevent them from toppling over.

● **DEADHEADING** It's a good idea to deadhead lupins after the first flush of flowers has faded, because it stops the plants wasting their energy on producing seeds. You might also get a second flush of flowers in late summer. "It's not quite as dramatic as the first flush, but you will get more flowers," says Sarah.

● **DIVISION** You can propagate plants by division, in early spring or autumn "either before

they flower or well after," Sarah cautions. "If they're big plants they can take some dividing – you'll need a spade," she adds.

● **COLLECTING SEED** If you want to collect seeds to sow, don't deadhead all the flower spikes. Leave one for seed production and chop the rest down. The seed won't come true, but it can be fun to see what will be produced. "It's a gamble; you'll have to be happy with whatever comes up," says Sarah. "It won't be of the same quality as those that are vegetatively propagated, though." Soak seed overnight for 12 hours, or chip the end of the seed case opposite the eye to increase the germination rate of these hard-coated seeds.

STEP BY STEP

● **BASAL CUTTINGS** The only way to guarantee new plants that are the same as their parents, is to propagate lupins vegetatively, so take basal cuttings in February. **1.** "Look out for the little white shoots coming off the crown and pull or cut them off," says Sarah.

● Aim to take cuttings that are around 10cm long. **2.** Insert the cuttings into individual pots or a module tray that is filled with well-drained compost. **3.** Cuttings should root within a few weeks – "and they don't need any heat at that time of year", Sarah points out.



tulips and alliums, later conveniently hiding the bulbs' dying leaves. They go well

**Above** 'Masterpiece' has found favour with garden designers at Chelsea in recent years.

with all sorts of other perennials – astrantias and epimediums are two of Sarah's favourites – and sit nicely with grasses. Peonies are a perfectly-timed flowering companion, offering the perfect contrast of flower shape for the lupins' upright spires. Many of the lupins Sarah sells can produce up to 20 flower spikes in one go – "they can get quite big", she notes.

Staying on top of a few key tasks will keep plants in their pomp. This includes paying attention to slugs when the tender young foliage first emerges – Sarah recommends organic pellets based on ferric phosphate – and staying alert for outbreaks of aphids. Lupins suffer from an aphid all of their own, the greyish-white lupin aphid, which multiplies at the speed of light to smother flower spikes, distort growth and sometimes even kill the plant in very bad infestations. "It's just a case of being vigilant, from early April," Sarah advises. "If you see it, use soft soap if you're organic, or an insecticide like RoseClear to get rid of them quickly. They seem to home in on one plant and just scoff that one, so if you get a bad infestation like that, cut the plant right down to the floor." Aphids often overwinter at the plants' base, so Sarah recommends chopping lupins back to ground level in September, rather than leaving leaves and stems in place until spring. ■

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