

THE STORY OF SCABIOUS BUTTERFLY BLUE

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How it started

Although I was trained as a grower, I have never been very good at the growing of plants. I have always had a much greater interest in general management and, in particular, in selling and marketing. I have for a long time had the ambition to introduce a new plant and see it established as a brand leader. Although this had been attempted in the United Kingdom before, the job in my opinion had never been done effectively enough. When I analysed the problems, I found that they were two-fold—one was the high risk which would be related to the introduction of a plant, and the second was the finance which was required to initiate and sustain an effective promotional campaign. It seemed to me an ideal opportunity to co-operate with another major nursery in an attempt to spread the risks, improve the distribution capacity, and help reduce the financing of the promotional campaign.

In the spring of 1984 I approached a colleague of mine who is general manager of Fargro Plants to see if he shared the same interests in finding and marketing new plants. During the summer of 1984 we formed a joint company called—"Pride of Place Plants Ltd."—between Fargro Plants and Blakedown Nurseries Ltd.

The objective of this company is to find and market new, unusual, and unappreciated plants of garden merit.

Having formed the company we now needed a plant. Perhaps the other important ingredient to any new prospective venture is luck, and this is where "Lady Luck" took a hand. One of Fargro's growers, David Tristram, had lived for some time in the Irish Republic. During the course of his stay in Ireland he had been given a plant of a dwarf scabious. When he moved to England and became involved in nursery stock production he brought this and several other plants from his Irish garden and re-established them in England. It was about this time that David had started to propagate small quantities of this dwarf scabious. Luckily, none had been marketed at this stage.

We decided that this scabious could well be a suitable plant for our first joint marketing venture.

So what is so special about the scabious we now call 'Butterfly Blue'?

The cultivar is a sport of our indigenous scabious—*Scabiosa columbaria* (Figure 1). It is, of course, a herbaceous perennial. 'Butterfly Blue' differs from its parent in that it flowers con-

tinuously from April to November and, under mild conditions, may even flower in winter. It will grow on almost all types of soil, including those with a low pH. It is particularly successful on chalky soils. It is not fussy as far as aspect is concerned, succeeding well in full and partial sun and in light shade. It is compact and requires no staking; flower stems have a maximum height of 40 cms. Because of its dwarf and compact habit it is suitable for many garden uses, including flower beds and borders, patio tubs, and window boxes. An added attraction is that it is attractive to both butterflies and bees. It is also a useful cut flower, being long lasting when cut.



Figure 1. The appearance of *Scabiosa columbaria* 'Butterfly Blue' in flower.

Before we could market any plants we had to propagate and grow saleable plants within our nurseries. Propagation is a fairly simple matter from soft stem cuttings preferably with no flowers, which may be taken at any time during the growing season. Cuttings are inserted in 13 × 8 holed modular trays—the hole size being 4 cm; no hormone is given before insertion. The rooting medium used within the trays is 70% sphagnum peat and 30% fine polystyrene granules. At certain times of the year we add a kilo of 9 month Osmocote and 1.2 kilos magnesium limestone per cubic metre. After insertion into trays the cuttings are rooted under a double-skinned polythene tunnel with hessian scrim and mist propagation. The scrim is a technique which you may have come across before. Used in conjunction with mist propagation it prevents high calcium deposits and leaching from the leaves; it also produces an excellent microclimate close to the plants. The technique was adapted from

work carried out by Dr. Keith Loach at the Glasshouse Crops Research Institute.

Rooting takes 10 to 14 days; bottom heat is only used at the end of the rooting season (September/October). Approximately 400 cuttings can be propagated from one mother plant each season. We are now beginning to use micropropagation as a means of reproducing the plant.

Growing

How the plants are potted-on depends at which time of the season they are rooted. Late summer rooted cuttings, say from August onwards, are potted into ½ litre pots and held in this size pot throughout the winter. Cuttings which are rooted in the spring and summer are directly potted into their final 1½ l pot. All the pots used are rigid black plastic. Compost is based on 75% peat and 25% grit, with Osmocote added. We require the majority of our saleable plants for the middle of April to coincide with increase in customer activity in garden centres. We continue a successional propagation and potting programme to ensure we have saleable plants from the middle of April until the middle of October.

Marketing

The first decision we had to make was how many plants we should grow for the initial launch. As we had never introduced a plant before there was no previous track to be guided by. We could only grow the number of plants which we had space for on our nurseries, and which we could afford to grow. On the other hand, we knew we must grow sufficient plants to cover the very high initial launch and promotional costs.

Above all, the number of plants which we would be able to produce would be controlled by the amount of propagation material we could obtain. We finally decided on the figure of 40,000. We then gave serious consideration to how we would sell 40,000 plants. From our previous experience we knew we would have to offer a basic promotional package, as follows:

20 × 30 in. 4-colour poster

6 × 8 in. bed head label

Large 4-colour individual plant label

In addition, we also decided to take full page colour advertisements in major gardening magazines by the side of which we listed the names of stockists of 'Butterfly Blue'.

We also decided to attempt to do something which had never been done in the hardy nursery stock industry in the United Kingdom—and that is, we would dictate the recommended retail price.

We eventually decided on a wholesale price of £1.27p, excluding V.A.T. This price was arrived at by taking the basic wholesale price of a herbaceous perennial which was 80p, deciding

that we should add a novelty premium, which we concluded should be 20p, and then adding on 27p to cover part of the promotional costs.

In the U.K. most garden centres "mark up" their plants by 100% and then add V.A.T. We felt that this would make our product too expensive and, therefore, recommended a retail price of £2.49p, inclusive of V.A.T., which equates to approximately 70% "mark up" on cost. I am pleased to say that garden centres have found this to be a satisfactory price point and "mark up". We did, of course, have two selling jobs to undertake. The first was to sell our plant to garden centres to stock. We accomplished this by producing Selling In Leaflets, explaining not only the attributes of the plants but the advertising and PR campaign which we were staging.

In addition, we attended several major trade shows and launched the plant at the International Garden Centre Association Conference and Exhibition in January, 1985. I think that even we were astounded by its initial success. We sold 10,000 plants in the first half-hour and the first crop of 40,000 within 3 weeks. During the course of 1985 we managed to increase our production from its original 40,000 to 70,000 and sold all the plants which we produced; in fact, there was a great shortage of material throughout the season.

Toward the end of 1985 we decided that we must keep the momentum going through the next season. Our promotional campaign of 1986 was a two-pronged attack. During 1985 we had discovered a pink sport of 'Butterfly Blue'. We decided to run a promotional campaign based on a competition to name this plant. Entry to the competition was only possible to those who purchased a 'Butterfly Blue'. We developed a prize structure which started at £5. and finished with a National Winner of £500. Again we produced an elaborate Selling In Leaflet, explaining the competition which was circulated to all reputable garden centres within the U.K.

I am pleased to say that the competition has been an outstanding success. Over 150 garden centres within the U.K. are actively involved in the promotion. To date we had had nearly 2,000 entries to the competition, with a choice of over 600 different names for our new pink scabious.

In addition to our competition, 1986 saw the opening of our first National Garden Festival at Stoke-on-Trent in Staffordshire—a great promotional opportunity. We decided to stage a large display of 'Butterfly Blue' at the Garden Festival. We picked a site just inside the entrance and planted the semi-circular beds up in April of 1986 with some 1500 plants. We also produced a leaflet which is available from all information kiosks at the National Garden Festival as well as giving details of the attributes of 'Butterfly Blue'; it also contains a list of all stockists in the U.K.

Has it been a success?

There has been a great deal of thought, effort, and money put into the marketing of scabious 'Butterfly Blue'. We have spent in excess of £20,000 (\$30,000) on the promotional activity to date. This will have yielded sales by the end of this current season of some 270,000 plants—with a wholesale value not far short of £350,000, or in excess of half a million dollars.

It has also established Pride of Place Plants Ltd. as an organisation with credibility and an organisation capable of handling large scale plant introductions.

We feel confident that the annual market for 'Butterfly Blue' within the United Kingdom will be in the order of 100,000 to 150,000 plants per annum.

Plant breeders' rights

We took a decision in the early stages of our discussions not to put 'Butterfly Blue' in for plant protection rights in the United Kingdom; instead we registered the name Scabious Butterfly Blue as a trade mark.

We then adopted the policy of producing a large volume of plants in a short space of time on the assumption that we would have cornered the market. This policy has worked successfully.