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The explosion of bud-flowerers

JÜRGEN SCHRÖDER

Gesellschaft der Heidefreunde, Lütjenmoor 66, 22850 NORDERSTEDT, Germany.

Some years ago one was inclined to say: “the bud-flowerers are on the advance”. Now it seems that we are experiencing an “explosion”. In the 1980s only a few bud-flowering *Calluna* cultivars, each one having been collected in the wild, were known: ‘David Eason’ (introduced 1935), ‘Dunwood’ (before 1977) and ‘Underwoodii’ (1936) from Great Britain; ‘Adrie’ (introduced 1974), ‘Ginkel’s Glorie’ (before 1972), ‘Marilyn’ (before 1972), ‘Marleen’ (before 1972) and ‘Visser’s Fancy’ (introduced 1972) from the Netherlands. The best-known of these, and still general in the trade, is ‘Marleen’. In the past ten years a lot of new bud-flowering heathers have been raised in Germany, and breeders now compete with each other to bring more and more cultivars into commercial production, often with the protection of plant breeders’ rights.

During the last 20 years marketing has also changed: formerly small nurseries which propagated a limited number of plants of a large number of cultivars sold plants directly to private buyers; today, very large numbers of only a few cultivars are sold at auctions and afterwards garden centres and supermarkets sell these on to private buyers. Correspondingly, nurseries have changed their propagation schemes to producing very large numbers of only a few cultivars. It is almost an industrial process, and every propagator looks for gaps in the market.

In 2003 about 80 million *Calluna* plants were propagated in Germany – about 65 million of these were bud-flowerers – and most were destined for an entirely new market. No longer are the owners of heather gardens the main target group: quite the reverse, for those people now represent the smallest group, buying only about 5% of the production. The new customers are the people who wish to adorn their balconies and terraces in late autumn and early winter with bowls and troughs of flowering plants, and also those who will place heathers as winter decoration on their family graves. The latter bought about 25% of the bud-flowerers in 2003.



Figure 1. Left to right *Calluna vulgaris* 'Aphrodite'; 'Marlies'; 'Sandy'; 'Theresa' and 'Larissa'.

The propagating nurseries put their potted heathers on to the market from September until November at intervals of about a fortnight, so that bud colour lasts from the time of sale until December/January. In this connection, the survival of the plants through the winter is not the aim. On the contrary, the vast majority of these heathers end up in the garbage box, because the sellers hope for lucrative new sales next year.

The result of the flood of new bud-flowering *Calluna* cultivars is that many of them are indistinguishable: differences often exist only in the imagination of the producers! For example, 'Marlies', a sport on 'Marleen', one of the clones not protected by plant breeders' rights, has given rise to numerous progeny including 'Anka', 'Bella Rosa', 'Bonita', 'Cheyenne', 'Christin', 'Feuerzauber', 'Heideglühen', 'Manuel' and 'Sphinx'. It would be a wonder if all its "children" are discernably different.

At the moment about 80 bud-flowering cultivars, with and without breeders' rights, have been named, and at least that number again are on trial at the Bundessortenamt in Hannover.