



A Brief History of Flower Shows

The earliest recorded official flower shows appeared during the 1830s. During the Victorian era there was a great upsurge in shows of every kind, particularly for organisations like the fur and feather clubs and anything collectable. These events were great entertainment, especially during the summer months.

Charles Darwin had described the many species of plants he had seen on his travels. His works inspired other botanists and naturalists travelled the world to bring these plants back to Britain. Among the most famous of these was James Banks, who travelled with James Cook on the Endeavour to the Pacific. He later became the Director of Kew Gardens and was knighted. The result of all their efforts is that this country today has the highest number of garden plants of any country in the world, approximately 100,000 different species. These men became known as the "Plant Hunters." Even today, new species and varieties are still being found across the globe.

These plants were brought back to the botanical gardens and stately homes of Britain, where they were identified, catalogued and propagated. Eventually they were released to professional growers to propagate in large numbers to sell to the public. During the 19th century, standards of living improved and a more affluent middle class emerged. They saw the new, exotic plants on visits to botanical gardens and stately homes, and were inspired to try to recreate what they saw in their own gardens, just as keen gardeners still do today.

Plant nurseries and market gardens were generally found just on the perimeters of towns and villages. Traditional market towns were usually spaced approximately 8-15 miles apart, making it easy enough for a nurseryman to transport his plants or vegetables to market by horse and cart. They could also sell plants by mail order. However, like retailers everywhere, they were always looking for ways to attract new customers, and the idea of a plant show for trade nurseries was born.

Naturally, these shows had a competitive element which encouraged the exhibitors to put up elaborate displays, especially if there was prize money to be won. By the late 19th century, the railway system was in place. Nurserymen now had the opportunity to put their show plants on a train, to exhibit them anywhere in the country. This introduced them to even more customer, increasing their mail order plant sales. We know this happened because there are exhibitors today who tell us that is exactly what their grandfather or great-grandfather did!

After the 2nd World War, flower show exhibitors took to the road in greater numbers. The "Golden Age" of Flower shows was from the 1950s to mid-1980s. There were hundreds of professional show exhibitors travelling around the country from April to November. Some of the exhibitors would do up to 60 shows a year! As they would often see one another at the many different shows, there was a great feeling of camaraderie amongst exhibitors. The whole show circuit resembled a giant, floral travelling circus. .

After 1980 there was a huge increase in the number of garden centres, and the big DIY shops also started their own garden sections. Exhibitors at the flower shows started to see a decline in their sales. At about this time, the number of very large flower shows increased, especially those held by the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS). The Chelsea Flower Show has always been the pinnacle of success and the RHS tried to emulate that. In 1985 they ran the Hampton Court Show, and in 1998 the Tatton Park Show. Some of the county showgrounds also started spring and autumn shows under the banner of the RHS. These shows were successful and could attract 150,000 visitors or more. Many exhibitors found their sales going up at these shows, but noticed a decline at the local county or independent shows.

Today there is now a shortage of exhibitors, probably 50% fewer than 20 years ago. The costs for exhibitors to attend the big shows have gone up, and the numbers of visitors attending has gone down, with the exception of Chelsea Flower Show. Many of the smaller shows are struggling to find enough exhibitors and some have closed completely.

By the year 2000, the New Forest Show was finding it difficult to attract enough flower show exhibitors from around the country. One major problem was the travelling costs for exhibitions. The committee decided to go back to basics and become a support show for local nurseries. This means that we focus on growers within a 60 mile radius of the showground, although we do also invite exhibitors from other parts of the country if they are willing to travel. Over the last 14 years this has proven to be very successful, so much so that other shows are now trying to follow our example.

What does a flower show have to offer? As stated earlier, there are approximately 100,000 different garden plants available according to the RHS. Garden centres do an excellent job, but on they will only stock those plants that are the best known sellers. Flower shows support the smaller independent specialist nurseries, who grow the lesser-known but equally beautiful varieties. At a flower show, you can find the unusual and rarer species and varieties to make your garden unique. Please visit our show and be wowed by the experience.