



# DELPHINIUMS, PAST AND PRESENT

By Irene Virag

JUST YESTERDAY – 23 years ago to be exact – I was a student in England and I found much to admire. Fish and chips. Double-decker buses. Warm beer. And gardens. Ah, yes, the gardens. It was then that I first saw delphiniums.

It matters that I am not talking about great public gardens like Kew or the flower-filled cottages of the Cotswolds. I am talking about the small front yards of the row houses in the residential London neighborhood where I lodged. They absolutely brimmed with pastel blooms that fluttered in the breeze and – along with purple and chartreuse paint jobs – made something special out of the attached houses with their lace curtains and electric fireplaces. And of all the flowers, the delphiniums were the most impressive.

Cross out impressive. To a girl from the colonies, they were incredible. Great clumps of tall, majestic flowers with a stunning depth and brilliance of color. Shades of blue and purple and pink and bicolor combinations. I love the color blue and I was moved to the edge of tears by a shade that was as purely beautiful as a cloudless sky on a bright summer day. To this moment, I cannot imagine a truer blue.

I admired the delphiniums of the row houses almost as much as I admired Rudolf Nureyev, whom I watched from the cheap seats in Covent Garden every chance I got. Nothing in the real world could be as graceful as Nureyev, but in their stationary style, the delphiniums were close.

In those days I had no more thought of planting delphiniums than I had of doing a pas de deux with Rudolf Nureyev. The delphiniums were transitory – part of the twin adventure of youth and a foreign country. And I was not yet a gardener. Now I am, and I can at least think about planting delphiniums.

I haven't done it yet. I'm still awed by them. And I have good reason to be. To begin with, this is a case where it's impossible for a living plant to live up to a memory. And no matter what, I doubt that even in my suburban paradise, I could ever compete with the postage-stamp-sized gardens of that working-class neighborhood in southeast London. When it comes to delphiniums, I think the Brits will always have us beat – it's a matter of climate and tradition. More important, delphiniums are the most finicky of flowers – the true prima donnas of the garden.

I learned this and a lot more on a stroll through Old Westbury Gardens with my friend Nelson Sterner. He's the head of horticulture there and he's been to delphinium-heaven – the flower show at Wisley, England, sponsored by the revered Delphinium Society. "Breathtaking" is the word Nelson uses to describe the steeples of luminous flowers that grow as tall as Patrick Ewing – and almost as wide. "In England, one plant can have five flower spikes. Each year the clump gets bigger and bigger. I couldn't believe my eyes. We can grow delphiniums here – but not like that."

Not that the delphiniums in the Walled Garden at Old Westbury are shrinking violets. I'll have you know they are the hybridized progeny of the English giants. Every summer, members of the Delphinium Society hand-pollinate the best of their best delphiniums. Each plant can have as many as 100 blossoms and has the potential to produce as many as 4,000 seeds. And by mid-October Nelson is perusing the seed list, making his order for the flowers that will grace the borders at Old Westbury Gardens and the plants that will be sold at the annual spring sale.

But there's a catch. Delphiniums don't grow true to seed, which means that the results of these crosses between named cultivars can't be precisely predicted. You may know that the parents were Royal Flush and Pink Seedling and that it would be reasonable to expect a dusky pink flower with white eyes. But in the realm of plant genetics, the color pink – like red hair in humans – is recessive. "That's what makes it fun," Nelson says. "It's just a cross so there's tremendous variation in color. If you want a true delphinium you have to propagate from cuttings."

But whatever the color, delphiniums are the gardener's holy grail. Perhaps they seem so special because they are such prima donnas. They need a lot of support – 5-foot stakes should suit them. And as the flower spikes grow, they need constant adjustments – bind them with jute twine but keep loosening the tie as they expand so they're not cut in two. They demand full sun and well-drained, slightly acid soil and generous heapings of compost. They like lots of water and fertilizer – Nelson suggests a granular fertilizer in the spring and a high-nitrogen soluble fertilizer every three weeks until the blooms open in early summer. Then they'll be satisfied with a balanced feed.

Although Nelson treats his delphiniums like annuals, he says that with proper care they can last a few years. With this in mind, he suggests disbudding the plants the first year and forgoing flowers to establish a good root system. "It's heartbreaking," he says, "but if you want success, it's the way to go."

And be on the lookout for slugs. The slime monsters of the garden eat the growing tips of young delphiniums and destroy the season's blooms.

At Old Westbury, the delphiniums do the colonies proud. On a gray drizzly day when the weather was doing its best imitation of an English morning, spikes of lavender-pink and white and shades of blue from baby blue to neon gentian blue were drop-dead gorgeous. They stood in beauty against backdrops of pale pink roses and showed off next to dahlias and snapdragons and feverfew and hollyhocks.

I liked the blues the best, but I couldn't pick an absolute favorite. Next year, I thought, I'll do it - I'll plant delphiniums.

All I know is that I looked at a clear blue delphinium next to a climbing tea rose called Sombreuil and I was a student in London again lost in the wonder of front-yard gardens like none I had ever seen before or dreamed I could have. And it seemed like yesterday.