

Lavant Horticultural Society

“Alstroemeria & other UK Cut Flowers” **Ben Cross** 10th February 2021

Just some notes, by no means comprehensive, from Ben's talk that may be interesting or useful.

Ben is a fourth generation grower at [Crosslands Flower Nursery](#), Walberton, specialising in alstroemeria.

Alstromeria (Peruvian lily), with its origins “half-way up the Andes” in Peru and Chile, is a cool crop – its optimum growing temperature is 13°C.

It also likes dry conditions – in the nursery they are watered once a month in the winter and once a week in the summer; in the winter with soil level irrigation, watering the soil whilst keeping the plants and the air around them dry; in summer overhead sprays are used, as there is not so much foliage to stop the water and nutrients getting to the soil and the higher temperatures will keep the moisture around the tops of the plants low.

Between crops the soil is sterilised with ‘*Basamid*’. Every two years the growing beds are topped up with large quantities of a peat-free compost that is made up specifically for the nursery to meet the nutrient requirements indicated by soil tests.

The alstroemeria is bought in as small plants that are planted at the end of August. This gives them time through the autumn and winter to develop a good root system. Apart from the usual advantages, this is important for the way in which the flowers are harvested.

The flowering stems should not be cut off, but should be pulled out from the base of the plant, so this clearly needs to be anchored by a good root system.

If the flowers are harvested by cutting off the stems, the stubs left behind can rot and hinder new growth. Pulling the stems out stimulates new growth.

The main seasons of growth for alstroemeria are spring and autumn – in summer it is more dormant due to the heat.

Regular maintenance in the nursery:

- Pull out blind growth (stems with no flower buds) to ensure all energy goes into flowering stems.
- “Tucking in” – putting back any escaping stems inside the supporting wires.
- Weeding by hand.

Pests:

Greenhouse whitefly – use biological control, [Encarsia**](#), minute wasps that feed on the whitefly without damaging the plants. The Encarsia are purchased on cards that are hung in the crop.

Leaf hopper – use yellow sticky cards to catch these. Both sides of these cards are sticky, but to start with pull the backing paper off just one side – when this has become covered with insects, the other sticky side can then be exposed.

Aphids – have a very good ladybird population.

Blackfly – attacks are very patchy, so they just pull out affected stems and destroy them as soon as any blackfly appear.

Red spider mite – again use a biological control, [Phytoseiulus**](#) – this is another mite that has a voracious appetite for red spider mite and does not damage plants.

**** [Click for suppliers of Encarsia and Phytoseiulus](#)**

All the alstroemeria grown by the nursery are of varieties bred specifically for the cut flower trade, all covered by Plant Breeders' Rights (PBR), so that the nursery is not allowed to resell the plants or propagate from them. It has to pay a licence fee just to grow them for the flowers.

If you grow alstroemeria in open ground you may need stop it from spreading, as it can be quite rampant.

However, alstroemeria can be grown very successfully in containers. There are dwarf varieties that are particularly good for this – tall varieties can make a pot top-heavy.

By moving pots around (into greenhouse or conservatory in winter) you can get them to flower all year round, but they must be protected from frost.

“British Flowers Rock” – Ben is also very active in promoting the advantages of locally grown alstroemeria at a time when imports from many distant lands, from Columbia to Cambodia, have taken over most of the UK market. They have done this on the basis of slightly lower prices which allow supermarkets to increase their margins. The long transport by air or sea and the implicit delay in getting the flowers to the point of sale require more extensive plastic packaging, picking the flowers at an earlier stage of development and treating them with chemical sprays and refrigeration, all of which impacts on the quality of the blooms, the ability of the buds to open fully and their life in the vase. In addition, it also results in a much larger carbon footprint, compared with locally grown flowers. Most supermarkets prefer the higher margins they can make from imports, even if they pay lip service to UK sourcing and the authorities are not interested. Ben contrasted this with the situation of food, where public interest aroused by the wide-spread involvement of big-name celebrities has forced supermarkets into more UK sourcing and clearer labelling. Labelling of flowers can be very vague.

For UK flowers other than alstroemeria, Ben suggested the website [Flowers from the Farm](#).