

A peal of flowers

Easy to grow and much admired for their generous displays of nodding flowers, abutilons make great plants for patio containers, conservatories or even sheltered gardens, as **Tim Miles** describes. Photography by Lynn Keddie

THE ENCHANTING world of abutilons is one with which many gardens have had only a fleeting encounter. Admired for their elegant bell-shaped flowers, they are available in a range of colours, and bloom for much of the year. Their evergreen foliage varies in size, and in some is the main attraction. They are suited to patios or sheltered gardens as most have some frost tolerance and can be overwintered with a little protection, many making fine conservatory plants. Others are surprisingly hardy. While few are offered by garden centres, a wide range is available from nurseries, including some fine new selections.

Abutilons grown in the UK have their origins in South America and can be placed in two distinct groups – those referred to as *vitifolium* types (vine-shaped leaves) include two species, *Abutilon vitifolium* and *A. ochsenii*, as well as *A. x suntense*, a hybrid of the two.

They are stiff and upright reaching 5m (16½ft) and are usually grown on sunny walls where additional warmth and physical support are beneficial: they are quick growing but weak rooted. Saucer-shaped flowers appear May to July in white or shades of blue, and they are hardy except in the coldest parts of the UK if sensibly positioned.

The second group includes a range of hybrids derived from species such as *Abutilon pictum* and *A. megapotamicum*. These have bell-shaped flowers almost year round, in most shades but blue.

Passion for plants

During the Victorian period, interest in these plants blossomed; the 1870 edition of *The Flower Grower's Guide* listed 18 selections. Fewer than half of these are now available, but interest in abutilons has grown in recent years.

Father and daughter Eric Turner and Leila Jackson of T3 Plants of Wall End Nursery in Herefordshire are passionate growers of abutilons and grow several newer introductions. Many of these have been developed to present their flowers well, which is not always the case with older cultivars such as still-popular *Abutilon* 'Canary Bird' **12**, the yellow flowers of which are hidden by its leaves. By contrast, *A.* 'Sophia Jackson' is one of their own breeding with large flowers of yellow flushed with peach, clearly visible between leaves. ▶

RINGING BELLS

Abutilon pictured right are:

- 1** *A.* 'Nabob'; **2** *A.* 'Kentish Belle';
- 3** *A. megapotamicum*;
- 4** *A.* 'Cannington Carol';
- 5** *A.* 'Golden Fleece';
- 6** *A.* 'Clarice'; **7** *A.* 'Eric Lilac';
- 8** *A.* 'Patrick Syngé'; **9** *A.* 'Millie Houghton';
- 10** *A.* 'White King';
- 11** *A.* 'Souvenir de Bonn';
- 12** *A.* 'Canary Bird'





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Leila also speaks highly of *Abutilon* 'Clarice' **6** with large orange flowers; *A.* 'Apricot Belle' **17**, compact with well-displayed flowers; *A.* 'White King' **10** with large blooms; while pink-purple *A.* 'Eric Lilac' **7** is a hybrid seemingly with *A. vitifolium*, its parentage evident in its foliage and branching habit.

Many older selections are still worth a try, such as *A.* 'Ashford Red' with soft red, open bells and *A.* 'Cerise Queen' with rich cerise-rose flowers.

Some plants are infected with a virus regarded of ornamental value. Best known is *A. pictum* 'Thompsonii', a Victorian favourite with leaves mottled with bright yellow, typical of Abutilon Mosaic Virus. While the virus reduces vigour, it does not seem debilitating and plants can provide fine displays.

Growth types

Among the abutilons with bell-shaped flowers are those with lax growth, notably *Abutilon megapotamicum* **3** and

its hybrids. Many are ideal for walls or trellises, their rangy shoots allowing them to grow with other flowering plants, extending seasonal interest.

Introduced to Britain from Brazil in 1804, *A. megapotamicum* has quite small yellow flowers enhanced by a bright red calyx (outer petals). The selection *A. megapotamicum* 'Big Bell' has larger leaves and flower while *A. megapotamicum* 'Variegatum' has yellow mottled leaves. Breeding in the 1950s gave us *A.* 'Kentish Belle' **2** and *A.* 'Cynthia Pike', both of which have greater vigour and flower size. *Abutilon* 'Patrick Syngé' **8** is similar but with burnt-orange bells; *A.* 'Hinton Seedling' has plenty of orangey-red flowers. All in this group are noted for their relative hardiness.

A favourite of Leila Jackson's from this group is *A.* 'Millie Houghton' **9**, a recent seedling from Wall End of *A.* 'Kentish Belle' with generous clusters of large apricot bells, each with a showy pink calyx. It flowers year round in the conservatory, yet is also cold hardy.

Abutilon flowers are most effectively viewed at eye level or above, in order to appreciate fully their delightful protruding boss of anthers from within the bells. Horticulturist Roy Cheek is a great champion of abutilons, having collected, grown and developed many while at Cannington College in Somerset in the 1970s. At the RHS Chelsea Flower Show in 1989 he exhibited more than 30 cultivars including many of these lax types, where they cascaded from

hanging baskets and raised planters. They may also be trained into standards or across small walls or frames, though this can take several years to achieve.

Generally, older plants are most impressive, but they need hard annual pruning to maintain vigour, and to encourage lush foliage and plentiful flower production. Leila favours waiting for plants to produce their first spring buds, cutting back to the strongest. Cuts made on multistemmed plants at varying heights will produce well-clothed specimens, whereas unpruned plants will become straggly.

Combining with other plants

Abutilons can be part of some winning combinations. Robust selections provide support for annual climbers such as *Rhodochiton*, *Lablab purpureus* and *Ipomoea* and with thought some inspired partnerships can be achieved. Be mindful of the vigour of companions so as not to swamp your abutilons.

Other companions include dahlias: the purple leaves and double crimson flowers of *Dahlia* 'Bednall Beauty' together with the marbled leaves of *Abutilon* 'Cannington Peter' form a sparkling pairing **14**. Also tender but easy, seldom-seen *Cuphea caeciliae* makes a great companion for the lax types, producing delicate orange, cylindrical flowers on arching stems.

Upright-growing selections such as *A. pictum* 'Thompsonii' and *A.* 'Canary Bird' are good for larger displays,

particularly those with an 'exotic' theme. *Abutilon* 'Souvenir de Bonn' **11** has attractive, creamy-margined, maple-like leaves and soft orange bells that look splendid with apricot-pink flowered *Canna* 'Panache'.

Growing conditions

Although abutilons are tolerant of dry soils once established, a good supply of water is beneficial. They enjoy decent light levels in summer yet do well in partial shade, especially in extreme heat. Enriching soil with organic matter is worthwhile, especially for permanent planting against the base of a wall, a location that tends to be dry.

Despite their beautiful yet somewhat delicate appearance, abutilons prove to be versatile, even tough plants in cultivation. Under glass they can provide year-round colour and are perfectly happy kept for some years in containers or bedded out for summer. Outdoors across the UK they are less reliable but, even if plants succumb to winter cold, they will have made a worthwhile contribution to your garden. ■

Tim Miles is a member of the RHS Tender Ornamental Plant Committee

SUMMER STYLE

- 13** *Abutilon* 'Cloth of Gold';
- 14** *Dahlia* 'Bednall Beauty' with the gold-splashed foliage of *A.* 'Cannington Peter';
- 15** *A. vitifolium* and *Kniphofia* 'Atlanta';
- 16** *Abutilon* growers Eric Turner and Leila Jackson;
- 17** *A.* 'Apricot Belle';
- 18** A pot-grown *A.* 'Kentish Belle'

VERSATILE ABUTILONS: IN POTS, UNDER GLASS OR OUTDOORS

Pots and bedding

Plant abutilons out after risk of frost has passed, although they may be lifted as late as November. At this stage remove soft growth, plant in as small a pot as is practicable and water well. Most will overwinter in just frost-free conditions (tolerating short subzero spells) if kept on the dry side. A garage or shed may suffice.

If growing in pots, choose a loam-based compost. This offers additional

ballast for stability with taller plants and improved nutrient retention than soilless growing media. Plants will respond to generous feeding; spring applications of controlled-release fertilisers are often most effective. Alternatively, liquid feed in spring and summer.

When planting containers, two or three plants will provide greater impact in their first season, although single plants fill out well in later seasons. Overwinter as lifted plants.

Under glass

In glasshouses and conservatories virtually year-round flowering can be expected. The key is to keep your plants well watered in summer, especially on hot days. Whitefly can often cause problems; biological and chemical controls are available but the best cultural solution is to use plants outdoors in summer, then bring them back under glass in before the frosts, where they will continue to bloom.

Growing outdoors

In coastal gardens, especially in Devon and Cornwall, specimens may bloom well even in January. Elsewhere in the UK, many can be considered for permanent planting, although hardiness varies between selections. Roy Cheek encourages adventure. He reports that a plant of *Abutilon* 'Canary Bird' survived -15°C (5°F) at Cannington. Leila Jackson reports that eight selections of *A. megapotamicum* are regrowing, despite an unrelenting month of -16°C (3°F) in Herefordshire last winter. To maximise chances of success, choose a plant several years old and plant in early summer in a site away from cold winds, frost pockets and winter-wet soils. It is worth rooting cuttings in spring or summer as insurance.