

DESIRABLE INTERLOPERS

Marion Jay

Introducing self-seeding plants can bring a new dimension to the garden. Many self-seeders are short-lived plants and are therefore geared towards producing sufficient seed for successive generations, so they flower abundantly and colourfully, producing lots of insect-friendly nectar to encourage pollination. They are useful for filling gaps as they happily exploit any opportunity in the border, and some even thrive between cracks in walls and paving. Often, their seeds germinate best where it suits them to grow, resulting in beautiful, healthy plants growing in optimum conditions. Self-seeders are usually robust and easy, which makes them good for beginners.

Growing self-seeders introduces the idea of design by editing, i.e. deciding which seedlings should be kept and which taken out. This is an approach favoured by Dan Pearson, whose expertise in creating 'wild' gardens was so gracefully illustrated in his Chatsworth garden at Chelsea this year [2015]. Allowing self-seeding may appear to be a fundamentally informal way of gardening, but in fact these plants are versatile enough to be used to great effect in formal designs, too. Stricter editing is the key in an ordered layout, confining the massed plants to geometric block forms, or using them to emphasise linear structure. Having used self-seeding plants myself for many years now, both formally and informally, I admit it is not a particularly low maintenance method of gardening. The editing process takes time and effort, but on the plus side it can help the gardener to develop a flexible, open-minded approach; colonisation by self-seeders has occasionally caused me to completely reassess existing plantings and allow a different, looser configuration to develop.

Costing only the price of an initial packet of seeds or a single plant, self-seeders are a remarkably inexpensive method of augmenting existing borders and building sweeps of colour. Or they can even be free! I unwittingly distributed white foxgloves seeds over my front garden a couple of years ago when I used my own home-made compost as a mulch. This June, a multitude of soaring, pure white spires, some up to 8ft tall, sprang up across the entire plot, stopping passersby in their tracks. They looked particularly effective at night, a small army of phantom sentinels in the moonlight.



Nigella papillosa 'Midnight'

Verbascum phoenicum 'Violetta' also proves useful as an 'en masse' filler, with its tall, slender, rich purple spikes providing height and colour over a good six-week period in spring. As an edge-of-woodlander, this verbascum prefers dappled shade; I have noticed its flowers tend to shrivel in strong sunlight. Both these and the foxgloves easily slot in alongside existing shrubs and perennials as their slim, upright habit doesn't crowd their neighbours.

Self-seeding plants include annuals, biennials, short-lived perennials and monocarpic plants (which may take some years to reach flowering, then die after setting seed). Annuals provide glorious washes of colour, the flowering period of which can be extended by succession sowing in spring. The best of these include *Nigella papillosa* (syn. *N. hispanica*) 'Midnight', which produces intricate, rich black-

purple flowers followed by extraordinary horned seedheads. Drought-tolerant *Eschscholzia californica*, the California Poppy, whose satiny, fluted-petal flowers are now available in a much wider variety of colours thanks to recent breeding programmes, also self-seeds well but with a

mixed heritage the progeny is unlikely to come true. *Cerinth major* 'Purpurascens' is also useful for drier situations, and as its moody, purple-blue-green hues are produced on bracts, it lasts well in the border.

Many of the most desirable self-seeders are biennials, including the scented Sweet Williams (*Dianthus barbatus*), Stock (*Matthiola incana*) and Sweet Rocket (*Hesperis matronalis*). Hollyhocks are best grown as biennials, as older plants tend to succumb to rust more readily. T&M have developed a seed strain they claim is particularly rust-resistant - *Alcea* 'Antwerp Mixed', which offers a wide range of colours - so perhaps these old cottage garden favourites could be back on the menu very soon. According to Helen Yemm, the cream-flowered Russian Hollyhock, *Alcea rugosa*, is also a reliably healthy choice. Some biennials can be rather thuggish; one of the most insistent is the beautiful silver-bracted *Eryngium giganteum*, whose errant seedlings must be removed when very small, before the tap-root runs too deep.

Short-lived perennials which seed freely may only live a few years but provide an excellent foil to other plants. The tiny rockets of *Verbena hastata* add height and movement to the border, rarely appearing visually intrusive. They contrast well with *Euphorbia oblongata*, which is a robust and bushy plant, growing to almost a metre tall and providing fresh, lime-green flowerheads for many weeks in summer. It self-seeds gently without becoming a pest. Fennel is also a wonderful companion plant; I recently saw how effective this could be when I attended Herts HPS member Sue Wood's NGS garden opening in Knebworth. Bronze fennel had been allowed to thread its way through a wide border, the repetition of its soft, feathery foliage linking the purple shades of the early summer-flowering perennials and bringing continuity to the whole scheme.

Monocarpic plants include some of the most architectural self-seeders. *Angelica archangelica* may take a couple of years to build up enough oomph to flower, and it's certainly a talking point when it reaches its full height, but beware the ensuing seedling proliferation! *Ferula communis*, the Giant Fennel, can pootle along for several years, complimenting neighbouring perennials with its plumes of rich green filigree foliage, but it is another that will draw crowds when it finally sends up huge umbels of yellow flowers to a height of 3-4 metres. My favourite of the monocarpic plants is *Peucedanum verticillare* (Giant Hog Fennel), with its tall, ruby red stems and elegant umbels of greenish-yellow flowers. What a plant! I first saw it at Great Dixter and it blew me away. I have three in the front garden, still at the herbaceous stage... fingers crossed for next year.

Certain long-lived perennials are prone to self-seeding, and some can be very useful indeed. Evergreen, bright red-pink *Dianthus deltooides* 'Flashing Light' is invaluable as groundcover on dry soil, and of course we are all familiar with the seeding propensities of primroses, oriental



Peucedanum verticillare



Dianthus deltooides 'Flashing Light'

hellebores and *Alchemilla mollis*. There is a short flight of stone steps in Kate Stuart-Smith's garden at Serge Hill in Hertfordshire, where only *Alchemilla mollis* has been allowed to self-seed amongst the cracks in the paving and it's simply stunning in flower, frothing and tumbling lime-green flowers over the stonework. Such a simple idea, such a ubiquitous plant and yet the effect is so striking. The tiny pink and white daisies of *Erigeron karvinskianus* (Mexican fleabane) are perfect for softening walls and steps, as they seed readily into cracks. To start a colony, instead of attempting to insert an actual plant into the wall, I have found it much more effective to mix the seeds into a handful of wet, ordinary garden soil, ball it up and push it firmly into the crack in the wall. That way, the plant germinates in situ and its roots find their own way as they grow, resulting in a well-adapted plant.



Hystrix patula

As you might expect from a grasses fanatic, I couldn't end this article without mentioning the self-seeding properties of ornamental grasses. *Milium effusum* 'Aureum', a short-lived perennial grass, is invaluable in the spring border with its soft, lime-green foliage and dainty, open panicles of flowers which light up shady areas. The leaves bleach horribly in full sun. Visitors to my garden have often asked about *Hystrix patula*, a tall (to 5ft) grass which also prefers a bit of shade. Grown for its bottle-brush shaped flowerheads up to 20cm long, which catch the light and sway in the wind, it is a quixotic plant, sometimes seeding prolifically and in other years hardly seen at all. I grow it in dappled shade alongside the much more diminutive rice grass, *Melica uniflora* f. *albida*, which flowers throughout the spring; its little white grain-like heads seem to float amongst the dark blooms of *Geranium phaeum* 'Raven' and powder-blue *Phlox divaricata* 'Clouds of Perfume'.

Although the rice grass self-seeds, I've never sold or given any away - I can always find a place in a semi-shaded area of the garden for that beautiful little plant.

Further reading:

Cultivating Chaos, by Reif, Kress and Becker, published by Timber Press.

The Dexter Handbook on Self-sowing Plants, by Frank Ronan - £3.50, available from the Great Dexter shop - www.greatdixtershop.co.uk.