

MILD AND MELLOW

Angela McCreery

All images © Angela McCreery



Lobelia tupa

The warm summers and mild winter of 2013-14 coincided with my having planted two lovely things of doubtful hardiness, especially as, like many Sheffield gardens, mine is fairly high up, (near Manor Top). I was therefore lucky to get nice big clumps of both plants in 2014.

The first was *Lobelia tupa*, acquired as a small but healthy plant on (I think) the 2013 HPS South Pennine Group coach trip to Lincolnshire. It comes from Chile, where it is apparently favoured by the Mapuche people as a hallucinogenic tobacco. (I have not tried this so cannot possibly comment.) After planting, its one shoot grew steadily but did not flower, and by early 2014 I could see it had a lot of new shoots coming round the base. I put some sand on it as a mulch, with a vague idea this might provide some suitable protection but the winter, whilst providing vast quantities of rain, hardly froze at all.

In the spring, all the shoots began to expand, until by the end of July it was a huge clump in full flower. Each flower spike gradually elongated until it was about 6 feet tall, then kept producing more flowers for the rest of the summer. It did not seem to set any seed. On inspecting the flowers to check for seeds, they showed a tendency to shoot pollen into the air when touched; I imagine this might be a sign of some interesting pollination mechanism. The flowers are an unusual shape, reminiscent of a snapdragon but different. They are a vibrant orange-red, contrasting nicely with the greyish-green foliage.

I felt very smug, telling my friends it was probably the only plant of this growing in Sheffield, but then I visited the Botanic Gardens and discovered a whole batch of them in the Mediterranean area. However, I did think mine had an especially rich colour compared with theirs. Mine has died right back now but has visible new shoots.

The other doubtful survivor plant was *Salvia uliginosa*, commonly known as Uglynose. It is one of the bluest salvias. Whenever I have planted it before, it has refused to flower until very late in the year, then been ruined by frost and snow, and died. This time was quite different. In 2013 it was bought (I think) from the salvia nursery at Great Comp in Kent, and planted at a good size with flower buds already on it, which was quite early.

It quickly grew into a good clump, and flowered right up to about Christmas. It had a bit of a rest, and then came into flower fairly early again in 2014; there are chunky buds of it to be seen in the background of the lobelia photographs taken in late July (see photo, right), although I don't seem to have taken any photos of the salvia itself.



Lobelia tupa with
Salvia uliginosa budding behind

As I write, the clump has been bent over sideways by the snow and frost of January and the upper part of the plant has died back, but it is still looking green underneath. The cold weather did not last more than about six weeks here.

Both these plants were planted in a sunny bed with shelter to the north, in a dryish area, sloping slightly south. This is not what *S. uliginosa* is meant to prefer, by the way; supposedly it likes damp, which it did get from the rainfall in autumn 2013.

A bitter winter after planting may have put an end to both of these plants, so I was very pleased with the coincidence of suitable weather for them.

❧ *First published in the South Pennine Group Newsletter, Spring 2015* ❧