

IN PRAISE OF BUSHES

Fran Scott

My father-in-law, a reluctant gardener, was compelled by his keen gardening sister to visit the renowned Dorothy Clive garden. That evening I asked what he thought of it. He deliberated for a moment, then replied, 'lots of bushes!'

When we planted up this garden seven years ago, I had great intentions of planting 'lots of bushes', to cut down on the work in the garden; remember that well-banded phrase 'low-maintenance garden'? But somehow, especially with visiting all these lovely gardens and nurseries with other Hardy Planters, I was unable to resist acquiring herbaceous plants. You know, the kind that take you hours to split and then, too soft-hearted to chuck all the bits out, you spend more hours potting the blasted things up to give to Plant Sales for Good Causes? Or the types that seed everywhere, like the wonderful *Verbena bonariensis*; I must have potted up at least fifty seedlings of it last year. And the delightful white verbasum, which we brought from the previous garden and which had never ever seeded, until the year that it did...and how! Every 2-inch verbasum seedling has turned out to have roots about 2ft deep and, having inserted themselves into the cracks between paving slabs, they're virtually impossible to root out.

Then there are the delightful herbaceous plants that sneakily send out underground runners along the bed, popping up bang in the middle of some prized plant. Those, I discovered, are the ideal subjects for root-cuttings, except that I don't need to take them as the plants do it for me. Mind you, that spreading habit provides a great source of herbaceous phloxes to hand on to friends, and no-one ever seems to tire of the beautiful deep pink, single-flowered Japanese anemone, which would cheerfully fill an entire bed (and the rest of the garden, too), if I let it.

I carefully researched shrubs seven years ago when we were planting the garden. I trotted round to my neighbour's garden, asking 'And did you put that one in?' and if she said 'Yes!', I took a mental note to avoid that one if it had already achieved fifteen foot in height, with no signs of stopping. We did - unwisely - plant a magnolia in one of the beds. It would have looked spectacular in flower...had it ever flowered. I think it managed one blossom, but looked so dreich the rest of the time, and grew so tall and wide, that we had to give it the chop.

Now I am beginning to think that lower maintenance is not just desirable, but necessary. I want to enjoy our garden, not labour in it and then feel guilty about all the jobs that I haven't managed to get round to doing. Our last garden really was low-maintenance; the garden faced north, so there wasn't much sun, and the soil was so awful that even weeds wouldn't grow. Because we dug generous holes for new plants in the clay soil, and filled them with good organic stuff, most of the plants never seemed to feel the need to spread!

This garden - south-facing, on sand and gravel - is quite different. The soil leaches nutrients and we have to feed twice as much as we did before, no matter how much compost and humus we add, which takes a lot of effort. At first, plants can't decide whether they like it or not, but most of them settle in well and show their appreciation by growing all over the place with huge enthusiasm. Including the weeds. I'd much rather be sitting reading my book under the sunshade than yanking out yards of bittercress (the bane of this garden); the ground-elder we leave at the back of beds and quietly ignore. The birds do love the brambles that grow profusely on the railway line next to us, and kindly donate seeds (complete with fertiliser), which grow very happily in and amongst our herbaceous plants. We don't tend to notice them until we need a crane to get them out. Then there's our other next-door neighbour, whose brambles come soaring over our high trellis and root themselves in what seems like five minutes. Not to mention the dandelion seeds that come waltzing across to us in the summer breeze...

I recently planted a new narrow bed in our drive-way with small evergreen shrubs. It gives me immense pleasure walking past it, especially as I know it will take very little work to keep it looking good. I really need to apply this to more of our garden. I am always happy to look around those wonderful gardens we visit with the Hardy Planters, knowing full well that someone else, rather than me, is going to be working to keep them looking so good.

These days we have more success in estimating the potential size of shrubs, though one did grow rather more than we had counted on. We had grown daphnes in the past - neat little bushes - but then I purchased a *Daphne bholua* 'Jacqueline Postill' from Kevock Garden Plants. Stella urged me to put it near our front door, so that we would get the benefit of the wonderful perfume in the winter. Well, we certainly do: it's eight foot high now! Smothered in purple flowers all winter, though, the scent is absolutely fantastic.

The trouble with such a lot of desirable shrubs is that they do grow far too tall and if, like us, you have a small garden, you really don't want to climb up ladders to hack huge chunks off them, then have to buy a trailer to cart all the debris off to the coup. However, if you look around, there are a number of shrubs that will coexist with other plants without taking over the entire garden. Plant breeders are also hard at work trying to create reduced versions of larger shrubs, recognising that most gardens these days are fairly small, and that people are short of time as well as space. Here's a list of those I've found to be of manageable size:

<i>Acer palmatum</i> (Some of them! Check height when purchasing)	<i>Ozothamnus rosmarinifolius</i>
<i>Andromeda polifolia</i>	<i>Parahebe catarractae</i>
Azaleas, herbaceous and evergreen	<i>Gaultheria mucronata</i>
<i>Caryopteris x clandonensis</i>	<i>Perooskia atriplicifolia</i>
<i>Ceratostigma willmottianum</i>	<i>Philadelphus</i> - low-growing varieties
<i>Chaenomeles</i> (can easily be pruned)	<i>Photinia</i> 'Little Robin'
<i>Choisya ternata</i> 'Sundance'	<i>Pieris</i> 'Little Heath'
<i>Cistus</i>	<i>Potentilla fruticosa</i>
<i>Convolvulus cneorum</i>	Rhododendrons - dwarf hybrids and low-growing species
<i>Cornus sanguinea</i> 'Midwinter Fire'	<i>Rhododendron</i> 'Praecox'
<i>Daphne</i> - (apart from <i>bholua</i> !)	Rosemary
<i>Hypericum polyphyllum</i> 'Citrinum'	<i>Ruta graveolens</i> 'Jackman's Blue'
<i>Leucothoe fontanesiana</i> 'Whitewater'	<i>Salix</i> - short and low-growing varieties
<i>Magnolia stellata</i>	<i>Sorbus reducta</i>
<i>Mahonia japonica</i> (does need to be pruned occasionally)	<i>Spiraea</i> - low-growing varieties
<i>Nandina domestica</i>	<i>Teucrium fruticans</i>
	<i>Viburnum opulus</i> 'Compactum'