

The HPS Horticultural Advisory Service

Focused primarily on hardy plants, the Society offers a personal Gardeners' Question Time service.

Here are some recent questions and answers.

From A:

My garden is being remodelled and there will be a 6ft by 2ft bed, raised on 3 sides, in full view from my kitchen window. The bed is south-facing, in full sun from 11 am, and the soil a free-draining loam.

Rather than a conventional flowerbed I would like plants 'to make a statement' and take my mind off the washing up. I was wondering about *Eryngium agavifolium* or *Fatsia japonica*.

Please could you suggest some evergreen plants for year-round interest.

To A:

The bed you describe certainly asks to be treated with imagination and courage: the only difficulty is that it isn't very big. *Fatsia japonica* is wonderful, but it will eventually make a large shrub which might look out of scale in this relatively small border. It can be spring pruned, taking too-big branches down to ground level, but you may not want this kind of work. The very handsome

Eryngium agavifolium is also a big plant and in a raised bed might be vulnerable to winds. This together with the *Fatsia* would more or less fill the bed. So perhaps we could come up with some striking alternatives that would be more in scale.

Eryngium proteiflorum has all the drama you are after, but rather more modest proportions. And either *E. bourgattii* or *E. x tripartitum* (fig. 1) at around 60cm are very handsome and would provide some summer colour with lots of their blue/grey flowers.

Euphorbia nicaeensis subsp. *nicaeensis* grows up

to 90cm which would give some height. It needs sharp drainage but it is evergreen and makes a lovely spring plant with its pink stems and blue/green foliage and contrasting limy flowers in late summer.

Not everyone likes *Bergenia* but several colour spectacularly in the winter: you could try BB. 'Bartok', 'Ballawley', 'Eric Smith' or 'Bressingham Ruby' which are all known for their fine colouring. Likewise, *Stachys* is not universally popular, but one like *S. byzantina* 'Big Ears' can be very effective. These would give some 'big leaves'.



Fig. 1 *Eryngium x tripartitum*.

For something spiky, you might consider one of the smaller *Phormium* like the variety 'Bronze Baby'. It isn't bone hardy, but with good drainage and shelter from cold winds should be OK. And although *Dierama* are not necessarily evergreen, their light and arching habit and beautiful summer flowers would look lovely and provide wind-resistant height.

A plant that certainly makes a statement is *Celmisia semicordata* with silvery-looking leaves

and large, pure white daisy flowers. These New Zealanders are a bit fussy, liking to hold centre stage with plenty of room and fresh air around them, but they can look very striking.

It is stating the obvious to say that any of the sun-loving shrubby herbs would look like this bed but their foliage is not large and may not be to your liking. But the purple-leaved sage can look marvellous (fig. 2) as can some of the feathery santolinas.

Finally, do make the most of the well-baked conditions in this bed by planting small bulbs for spring colour among all the dramatic foliage. Try *Iris danfordiae*, *Tulipa tarda* and *Puschkinia*. *Scilla peruviana* with its inky blue flowers would be worth trying too. And in late summer, scented white *Gladiolus murielae* (syn. *Acidanthera*) would steal the show.

Best wishes with your plans. 🌱

From B:

I have great difficulty with *Aster x frikartii* 'Mönch'. I sent for three plants which have been potted up for some months but as yet there is no sign of life. They have been in my greenhouse ever since I received them in the autumn. Can you give me any advice please.

To B:

Sorry that your plants seem to be doing badly. *Aster x frikartii* 'Mönch' is a hybrid of two alpine types of 'Michaelmas Daisy' which tells us that it likes good drainage and a not too rich soil. It also very much resents being disturbed in the autumn, so that it often succumbs to winter wet and cold combined.

So this might indicate that your plants really did not like being potted up in (possibly) too good a soil in the autumn when their inclination was to go into 'hibernation'. Also in your eagerness to spur them into growth, might they have

had too much water?

Spring would be a good time to get replacements however, and planting them in a not too rich or damp situation should ensure that they establish properly.

Do hope that this helps. 🌱



Fig. 2 The purple-leaved sage, *Salvia officinalis* 'Purpurascens'.

From C:

As usual I have been overwhelmed by my seed-raised plants. Now in August have a greenhouse full of plants dying to go in the ground, but I would hate them to be killed over winter after all of my TLC.

The plants I'm particularly talking about are *Ammi* (fig. 3) and white snapdragon. I know that we are advised that both of them make bigger plants from an autumn sowing, but these are biggish plants already – will they survive outside? Or should I continue nurturing them in the greenhouse/cold frame? I've also got lots of *Agastache* in plugs – if I plant them out in the next few weeks will they be okay? Many thanks.

To C:

It sounds as if you have had a successful year with your seeds!

Starting with the easy answer – it would be best to keep the *Agastache* until the spring before planting out.

It is always difficult to be certain about hardiness, but some are borderline in cold gardens, and all are certainly more vulnerable when young.

As far as the *Ammi* is concerned, it is more difficult. As an annual, autumn direct-sown *Ammi* tends to germinate in the spring and then grow rapidly. So the seed is what is sometimes called 'winter hardy'. However, young plants themselves being 'soft' may not be quite so hardy if we get a hard winter and may be turned to mush. An additional problem is that they do not transplant very well, hating disturbance to their taproots. This would suggest planting out now before they get too settled in their pots. A bit of a dilemma!

A belt and braces approach may be best – plant some outside now, and pot on the remainder into as deep pots as possible ready to plant out in the spring.

Snapdragon is tougher and easier to transplant, again with the proviso that

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Fig. 3 *Ammi majus* lighting up the rich colours of some of the Bishop series *Dahlia*.

we don't get a really hard winter, so a half and half approach may also be a good idea with them.

I hope that some at least go on to provide a flowery 2015!

You may find the answer to your gardening questions from members of your Local Group, or in the Society's on-line horticultural library, or use the HPS Advisory Service. The Service is free, and the Society's experts will try to answer your gardening questions, especially those concerning the use and growing of hardy perennials.

They will try to respond to you quickly, but please bear in mind that specialist questions may take some time to research.

Email your question to: advisory@hardy-plant.org.uk