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## Plants that deserve a wider audience

**Val Bourne** exhorts gardeners to be bold and to tolerate only excellent plants.

Fig. 1 Blue agapanthus with orange crocosmias at Bressingham.

Generally gardeners are a conservative lot, conservative with a small c. However our gardens would be far better if we were bolder and braver. For instance, I find many people are reluctant to dig a plant up even if it is not performing.

I urge you all to develop a ruthless streak and get rid of poor plants, or those that you hate. If you're unsure, remove them while you make a decision.

The Best Beloved and I have a special name for these 'Shall I or shan't I?' ones: we call them 'wheelbarrow plants' because they are put in a barrow until we decide whether to keep them, give them away, or compost them. At the moment a horrible hemerocallis, with dull red flowers that die very badly, occupies the barrow while we make up our minds.

The best gardens have 'plants on wheels', a term coined by a couple who had an NGS garden which was a master class in brilliant colour combinations. If something jarred the eye, or didn't cut the mustard, up it came to be replaced by something suitable lurking in the wings. They would move plants in and out, as and when, using spare pots kept by their shed. They were not afraid to use orange, the *bête noire* of many. And they used dahlias, another common 'no no'. And yet their garden was one of the best I've ever seen.

Everyone should embrace orange because it's the perfect touchpaper for blues and purples (fig 1).

I'm currently enjoying a fiery alstroemeria called Indian Summer (fig. 2). A well-bred neighbour

asked its name and when I enquired if she liked it she almost choked, but it's currently enhancing a swathe of annual blue cornflower, *Centaurea cyanus*, in the cutting garden beyond – although I never find time to cut anything.



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Fig. 2 *Alstroemeria* Indian Summer.



Fig. 3 *Molinia* 'Karl Foerster' in October.



Fig. 4 *Heliopsis helianthoides* var. *scabra* 'Summer Nights'.

The 'alstro' foliage is dark and dusky and the flowers, which tumble through a rusty iron tripod, feature mahogany, orange and yellow, with morse code dashes on the yellow petals. It has been flowering for months and will go on doing so. The technique with 'alstroes' is to pull off the stems of faded flowers, not snip them off, because the tugging process stimulates new stems from the meristem below.

Persevere with alstroemerias because, as they get more mature, they push themselves deeper into the ground rather as crocosmias do. This makes them far hardier in subsequent years, so if you can get an alstro through its first two years the chances are that you will have it forever. Mulch newly planted alstroes with a thick layer of bracken or straw in their first winter. Remove the mulch in early spring or slugs will ravage the new growth. Other good oranges are *Geum* 'Totally Tangerine' (great with silver-blue amsonias) and *Crococsmia* 'Okavango' – a full-petalled sunset shade that lights up August.

I always urge people to use more grasses. However, many are unable to wipe the stripy green-and-white Gardener's Garters (*Phalaris arundinacea* var. *picta*) from their minds. This horror was the first popular grass of the 1960s and it was highly invasive and – dare one say this to the Hardy Plant Society – variegated.

I do use variegation, but in the same way I use mustard on ham or mascara on my lashes, with a mere scrape. When variegation goes viral it's horrible. Please don't send letters!

Taller grasses move and sway, although they must be clump formers. The taller purple moor grasses (forms of *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *arundinacea*) mingle among tall herbaceous without smothering anything here. Their awns range from delicate 'Transparent', like fine jet beads, to top-heavy 'Windspiel'. I favour 'Karl Foerster' (fig. 3) for its golden aura and fine heads that stand until early winter when the stems collapse dramatically. One morning they lie flat like overheated guardsmen on the Queen's official birthday. Foerster was a German plant breeder who called grasses 'nature's hair' and no other plant unites a border so well, whether tall or short.

I've just visited the National Trust's Packwood House in Warwickshire and marvelled at their garden, one of the best I've seen for many a year. *Stipa gigantea* fountains to great effect along both sides of the main path to the house, and Pheasant Grass (*Anemanthele lessoniana* syn. *Stipa arundinacea*) curtsies too in a colourful hot border. Always buy from a grass specialist, because misnaming is rife. Hoecroft Plants are excellent and so is The Plantsman's Preference near Diss.

The latter holds a Plant Heritage collection of *Molinia* and I'm taken with the idea of 'Dark Defender', although I haven't grown it – yet.

I admire plants that signal the rhythm of the seasons and the dark-stemmed *Heliopsis helianthoides* var. *scabra* 'Summer Nights' (fig. 4) begins in July and announces that my autumn border is on its way. The branching black stems are topped with single yellow flowers, each with a burnished red middle, so it's very warm. Many other heliopsis are good too. However they aren't widely sold because they don't look great in a pot although they're sensational in the garden, flowering in July and reaching four feet in height. It's annoying that these days you can buy things only at the peak of flowering, as if we don't know what they are. Oh for a phlox or a hardy fuchsia in April or May, rather than a stressed one in August.

Tall grasses need tall perennials that perform at a similar time. One of the most useful in my windswept garden is the self-supporting *Thalictrum lucidum*. It has ribbed green stems, shiny almost-herringbone foliage and airy clouds of lime-green flowers in August. It precedes the burgundy clouds of eupatorium by a couple of weeks, and although the foliage discolours to yellow at the base, it's in the middle of a border so it doesn't show.

Continental gardeners use *Thalictrum* 'Elin' (fig. 5)



Fig. 5 *Thalictrum* 'Elin' with *Tulipa* 'Shirley' at Great Dixter.

as a backbone in prairie planting because the new dusky growth, which emerges early in the year, is very cold-tolerant and copes with their harsher weather. At Great Dixter it's the perfect foil for *Tulipa* 'Shirley', a mottled mauve Triumph that performs in April. 'Elin', a seedling found in Sweden by Rune Bengtsson who named it after his mother, is grown mostly for its damson-bloomed stems, although the grey-blue metallic leaves are a feature too. The July flowers are a rather ordinary lilac and lemon fuzz. It's a hybrid between *T. flavum* subsp. *glaucum* and *T. rochebruneanum* and was popularised by the Netherlands nurseryman

Coen Jansen.

*Thalictrum* is an interesting genus, now being trialled by the RHS at Aberglasney until next year. It has evolved from the dainty, lavender-flowered meadow rues we have always grown to include dark-stemmed hybrids and shorter foliage plants such as *T. ichangense* from China. In the trial there's a new tall one I hadn't seen before called 'Tukker Princess' (fig. 6), a cross between *T. flavum* and *T. 'Elin'*. The stems are not as dark or as dusky and they remind me of a washed-out pair of grandad's stripy pyjamas in faded grey and red. Apparently, as winter descends the stems darken, although I cannot confirm this.



Fig. 6 The dark stems of *Thalictrum* 'Tukker Princess'.

The flowers of 'Tukker Princess' form a sulphur-yellow cloud in July and they're very bee-friendly although they offer only pollen and not nectar. A new Arne Maynard Book<sup>1</sup> shows one long border in Oxfordshire planted up with *Thalictrum flavum* subsp. *glaucum* and *Aconitum* 'Stainless Steel' among other things. I think 'Tukker Princess' an improvement, although Arne might disagree. It's brasher, and apparently tukker, a Dutch term, means banner.

Tall plants are not always appreciated by gardeners, but many tall perennials perform in the second half of summer purely because they have a lot of growing to do to get up there. Some late, tall (5ft) sanguisorbas have dark bobbles for flowers and they offer a

good contrast. 'Blacksmith's Burgundy' (fig. 7) is my perfect sanguisorba because it performs in late summer and autumn, producing caterpillar-shaped hard heads that endure into winter.

Brian and Steph Ellis's Avondale Nursery near Coventry has a National Collection, one of their three. They don't do mail order and the nursery closes from 1<sup>st</sup> October until 1<sup>st</sup> March, but it's still one of my top five nurseries, with a wonderful display garden, so well worth a visit. They also do Rare Plant Fairs.<sup>2</sup>

The sanguisorba bobbles set off another tall plant, *Strobilanthes wallichii* (fig. 8), a salvia-look-alike with vivid-green foliage and blue-and-white flowers shaped like a

ship's funnel. The musty smell has inspired the disparaging common name of 'stinking nettle', but any plant named after Nathaniel Wallich (1786–1854), a Danish surgeon and botanist, seems to have handsome foliage and presence. Wallich worked for the East India Company before becoming curator of the Calcutta Botanic Garden; most of his Himalayan introductions appeared between 1820 and 1830.

*S. wallichii* is a member of the acanthus family. It's not bone hardy, only surviving to –10°C, and it relies on a good, warm, damp spring to perform well. Don't let this put you off because it's a splendid plant. I first saw it in the Yew Walk at Wollerton Old Hall in Shropshire – a garden full of the best plants used in all the best ways. It was mingling among the classic, white, single-flowered Japanese anemone, x *hybrida* 'Honorine Jobert', and the slender white bottlebrushes of *Cimicifuga*, now *Actaea simplex*. Elsewhere I have seen it rubbing shoulders with tall yellow daisies (*Ratibida pinnata* and *Rudbeckia laciniata* 'Herbstsonne'), along with pallid-yellow varieties of golden rod (*Solidago rugosa*). The violet-blue flowers set off the luminous yellows brilliantly. Sampford Shrubs (another good source of plants) used it with late orange performers such as *Crocsmia crocosmiiflora* 'Star of the East' and the exotic ginger lily *Hedychium densiflorum*.

<sup>1</sup> *The Gardens of Arne Maynard*, published by Merrell

<sup>2</sup> [www.avondalenursery.co.uk](http://www.avondalenursery.co.uk)

*Rudbeckia triloba*, a pin-neat yellow daisy with a crisp brown button, is another which will succumb in bad winters. Here in my cold garden it begins to flower in the second half of August and then keeps going, although it doesn't self-seed here as others say it can. The flowers are far smaller than most yellow daisies and the habit is upright and branching. It is short lived, doing an average of four years, so I'd rather like it to spread itself about!

The best borders are generously planted and a narrow strip can work well if it's a means of getting from A to B. There is a narrow border consisting of hardy fuchsias and Japanese anemones at The National Trust's The Courts in Wiltshire that works very well because it can only be viewed from each end. Most borders are seen from the front so they need width and lots of strong verticals too. *Veronicastrum*s, a continental favourite, do the job perfectly and as the flowers fade they provide a tapered seedhead that can top 5ft. They reliably return, they don't need staking, and they don't smother other things.

*Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Fascination' (fig. 9) is a favourite of mine, with flowers a warm lavender mauve. I have often wondered when I've looked at the fasciated flowers, bent over like mermaid's tails, whether the name is a play on words as it seems a short hop from 'fasciation' to 'fascination'. The distortion is another attraction for me.



Fig. 7 *Sanguisorba* 'Blacksmith's Burgundy'



Fig. 8 *Strobilanthes wallichii*.



Fig. 9 *Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Fascination'.



Fig. 10 *Acanthus mollis* Latifolius Group 'Rue Ledan'.

I also value the spires of *Teucrium hircanicum*, a bit of a self-seeder but invaluable for its dusky stems, bright-green foliage and purple tapers of flower. Reaching two feet or slightly more, this is a useful bee plant, though seedlings can be abundant. It does best in drier positions and it suits vegetable gardens, best planted with taller French marigolds.

Two more plants I'd like to see more often are as different as chalk and cheese. The stately white *Acanthus mollis* Latifolius Group 'Rue Ledan' (fig 10), first propagated by Jean-Pierre Jolivot, makes a bold statement with its glossy bright-green non-prickly foliage and robust green-capped white flowers. It was apparently discovered in England in a private garden, although I have no idea where. It's evergreen in most winters here and regularly produces sixteen to eighteen strong-stemmed flowering spikes in July and August which rise above the terrace.

Nearby I grow *Acanthus spinosus* and I find myself peering downwards anxiously to see how many flowering spikes there are. I can count them on only one hand, but their purple and white flowers go well with *Phlox paniculata* 'Monica Lynden-Bell'.

I would also like everyone to grow the lax *Hydrangea arborescens* 'Hayes Starburst' (fig. 11), which I acquired from Sally Gregson's Mill Cottage Plants some years ago now. This American-bred plant makes a humid August day bearable with its cool lime-green starry flowers. I have mine spilling over in a container along with a skeletal fern and a rather reluctant tiarella called 'Appalachian Trail'. 'Hayes Starburst' has a very floppy habit in the same way that *Ribes laurifolium* lolls about. Both look best in light shade. I do not stake. Don't miss out on Sally's *Plant Lover's Guide to Epimediums*<sup>3</sup> either. It's excellent.

Where would be without these clever nursery people! 🌿



Fig. 11 *Hydrangea arborescens* 'Hayes Starburst'.

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<sup>3</sup> *Plant Lover's Guide to Epimediums*, published by Timber Press