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Patagonian plants we grow in Britain

Keith and Lorna Ferguson

Fig. 1 The Patagonian Lake District – Chile is generally milder than the UK, so some plants are not fully hardy here.

A surprising number of plants that we grow in our gardens have originated in Chile and the adjacent part of Argentina in the region known as Patagonia, especially the area within Patagonia known as the Lake District (figs 1 & 2).

The climate in Chile is not dissimilar to our own, with rains blowing in from the Pacific Ocean eastward, but it is generally a little milder so that some Patagonian plants are tender, or need shelter, and can be regarded as not fully hardy throughout the British Isles.

The climate of adjacent Argentina is rather drier as it's in the rain shadow of the Andes, but plants from this region are still remarkably resilient in our wet winters.

Many of these plants tend to thrive better in acid soils, but equally there are many others which are quite happy on neutral clay.

The early garden plant introductions were from the collections made by William Lobb, who in the 1840s collected plants for the famous nursery Veitch & Co. His original instructions were first to send back

seed of the Monkey Puzzle (*Araucaria araucana*) (fig. 3) and, having done that, to send other garden-worthy plants; these included many well known shrubs including *Berberis darwinii* and some prized herbaceous plants such as *Tropaeolum speciosum*. Other collectors, including Comber in the 1920s, added to what we grow.



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Fig. 2 The Argentine climate is drier, but plants seem to cope with our wetter winters.



Fig. 3 Monkey Puzzle trees, *Araucaria araucana*, with *Chusquea culeou*.



Fig. 4 *Berberis valdiviana*.



Fig. 5 *Escallonia* 'Slieve Donard'.



Fig. 6 *Crinodendron hookerianum*, the Chilean Lantern Tree.

Today much of the interest of British gardeners is in the remarkable flora of the high Andes, for example, the rosulate violets.

Shrubs

Many of the plants we grow are woody and are the understorey or marginal species of a once forested region. The majority are evergreen, slightly tender, and in the UK more suited to gardens in the south and west or in towns. There are few native conifers, all of them in the "Threatened Plants" list for Chile, while most of the present forested areas are plantations of introduced eucalyptus or Northern Hemisphere conifers. Some of the native conifers which are also found in Argentina, with a much lower population density, are under much less threat; they include *Araucaria*, *Fitzroya* and *Austrocedrus*. The Argentinian forests, however, do not seem as rich in species as those of Chile.

Patagonia is one of the centres of evolution of the genus *Berberis* and the well known evergreen *B. darwinii*, introduced by Lobb, is a

common shrub in cultivation in Britain. Not so frequently encountered growing in Britain is the elegant evergreen *B. valdiviana* (fig. 4) with long pendulous racemes of orange flowers in April, looking rather finer in gardens than when seen on the Andean slopes of Argentina. A number of other species are less commonly grown, as well as the rather untidy hybrid *B. x stenophylla*, not infrequently cultivated in our gardens, which also is derived from Patagonian species.

Fuchsia magellanica with its many cultivars is perhaps the most widely recognised in Britain as being a Patagonian shrub. Most of the many species, hybrids and cultivars of *Escallonia* that we grow, especially in coastal gardens, are hybrids derived from *E. rosea* and *E. rubra* as parents. *E. rubra* var. *macrantha* with its large leaves is found in seaside gardens of the south and west where it withstands salt spray. *E. 'Iveyi'*, a rather complex hybrid of Chilean species, is not uncommon in many inland gardens and boasts an AGM. The 'Donard' series of *Escallonia* (fig. 5) bred in the famous North of Ireland Slieve Donard nursery have their origins in *E. 'Langleyensis'* (*E. rubra* x *E. virgata*).

One of the striking beauties is *Crinodendron hookerianum*, the Chilean Lantern Tree (fig. 6), with its large pink lantern-shaped flowers. It benefits from the protection of a wall or

fence and prefers a soil on the acid side of neutral. Big specimens in the wild seen in Chilean National Parks are unforgettable. Another delightful shrub is *Abutilon vitifolium* (*Corynabutilon*); blue- and white-flowered forms occur in the wild and *A. vitifolium* 'Tennant's White' with 3-inch flowers is both desirable and easily raised from cuttings. As abutilons are short lived we usually take replacements after 4–5 years. *A. x suntense* (fig. 7), of which there are some fine selections, is a hybrid between *A. vitifolium* and the now rare and threatened *Abutilon* (syn. *Corynabutilon*) *ochsenii*, which was introduced into cultivation in Britain only in 1957. *A. x suntense* is easily raised from seed and a rapid grower. Frequently found growing with abutilons in shrubby thickets is the well known *Buddleja globosa*, one of the few species in the genus occurring in South America. The genus *Azara* is a Patagonian plant of which *A. serrata* (fig 8) is perhaps best known for its clusters of richly fragrant flowers with bunches of yellow stamens, much loved by bees. It can grow to 20ft or more in a relatively short time but its drawback is being a vigorous surface-rooter, making underplanting less easy. *A. microphylla*, with tiny leaves and small fragrant flowers, can make a large shrub or small tree especially in the west of the country

(its variegated form is probably not so hardy); it adds winter interest when trained against a wall. It has withstood unscathed the recent cold winters in a number of West Midlands gardens. *A. lanceolata* is an elegant, medium-sized shrub with narrow leaves and branches pendulous in flower.

There are two notable members of the Potato Family. First *Fabiana imbricata* (fig. 9) with white tubular flowers in its wild form makes a shrub to 6ft and has many twigs with closely adpressed, pointed leaves reminiscent of a tree heath. It is said to occur north in the Andes to Bolivia but we have come across it only in both Chilean and Argentinian Patagonia. There is a lovely form, *f. violacea* (fig. 10), which thrives in south-west gardens. Secondly, from central Patagonia, *Vestia foetida* has pleasing primrose-yellow tubular flowers in April–May; it is a rapid grower and will gently seed about. As its name implies, when handled the foliage is foul smelling.

Desfontainea spinosa (fig. 11) grows to about 10ft but is much bigger in the warmer parts of the South West and western Scotland; it has holly-like leaves and from July until late autumn it produces funnel-shaped, scarlet solitary flowers with yellow lobes. Like many Andean plants it occurs from the Magellan Straits



Fig. 7 *Abutilon x suntense*.



Fig. 8 *Azara serrata*.



Fig. 9 *Fabiana imbricata*.



Fig. 10 *Fabiana imbricata* f. *violacea*.

Fig. 11 *Desfontainea spinosa*.Fig. 12 *Drimys winteri*.Fig. 13 *Embothrium coccineum*, the Chilean Fire Bush.

to Colombia, but the plants in cultivation are from Chile where we have seen it frequently as an understory shrub. A small shrub needing a sunny position in well-drained soil to flower well is *Colletia hystrix*, with green spiny leafless stems and white waxy fragrant tubular flowers. There is a fine pink selection, 'Rosea'. Flowering in the Patagonian

spring it is a lovely find in the wild, with its delightful fragrance, on drier soils in sunny habitats in areas of Argentina adjacent to the Chile border where the bees seemed to rather resent photography.

Rhaphithamnus spinosus, somewhat spiny as its name implies, makes a shrub to 20ft in ideal conditions. It has pale blue, tubular flowers in April followed by striking blue fruit. Grown in Gloucestershire as a small free-standing shrub for a number of years, it succumbed to the recent wet cold winters and is probably better suited to wall protection. *Drimys winteri* (fig. 12), seen in abundance in the coastal ranges of Chile ascending to the Parque Nahuelbuta as a 15 to 20ft tree, is quite variable. We have seen it thriving as a free-standing small tree or basal-branching shrub in southern and western gardens; it flowers in April with umbels of fragrant ivory-white flowers and well established specimens are proving hardier than supposed in inland gardens. *Philesia magellanica*, allied to the glorious but tender *Lapageria* and unusual climber *Luzuriaga radicans*, in ideal conditions makes a small suckering shrub or thicket to 3ft or so and in the wild will climb adjacent trees; it flowers from midsummer onwards with delightful large 1–2-inch-long waxy petals of soft crimson. A plant of coastal Chile, it requires shade, moisture and an acid

soil. Given these conditions it is said to be hardy throughout most of the British Isles and is eye-catching in Logan Botanic Garden. *Gaultheria* (*Pernettya*) is represented by a range of species and cultivars in UK gardens, mainly *G. mucronata* and *G. myrsinoides* grown for their berries which last over the winter. Plants with variously coloured berries are commonly encountered in the southern spring on Andean slopes.

There are a number of species not infrequently encountered in the wild which until relatively recently were placed in the genus *Myrtus*, but they have now been segregated into separate genera. They are usually aromatic evergreen shrubs or small trees with white flowers having numerous stamens, and they're hardy in western and town gardens. *Luma apiculata* (page 2) makes a fine tree or multi-stemmed shrub in milder areas, and has a lovely cinnamon-coloured bark that peels most attractively to reveal white patches. *L. chequen* is similar but found in wetter places in its native habitat; it is the hardest "myrtle" but lacks the handsome bark. Both *Luma* species flower in autumn. *Ugni molinae* flowers in May and is used as hedges in the south west; it has round red fruit, said to be delicious. *Amomyrtus* is also a shrub or small tree, leafy to the base and strongly aromatic; it flowers in May and there are specimens on Battleston Hill at Wisley.

Perhaps the finest of the Patagonian woody plants is *Embothrium coccineum* (fig. 13), another Lobb introduction; a member of the *Proteaceae*, it shows all the splendour of the family. Usually it occurs as a small tree lining the roadsides throughout the region and with its large racemes of bright scarlet to orange red, the colour varying greatly in the wild, it's a magnificent sight; it can be vigorous in a sheltered position in deep but well drained lime-free soil. There are some excellent plantings at Bodnant.

Another valuable ornamental shrub or small tree is *Eucryphia*, a genus that also occurs in eastern Australia, as do a number of other Patagonian genera which occur in both the Antipodes and South America. With the exception of *E. glutinosa*, which is semi-deciduous, all are evergreen with large white flowers with a boss of stamens. *Eucryphia* flowers here from July to September. Most require moisture-retentive lime-free soil and shaded roots. The most frequently encountered is the hybrid between two Chilean species, *E. glutinosa* x *E. cordifolia*, *E. x nymansensis* (fig 14), which flourishes in moisture-retentive neutral clay, a feature perhaps inherited from *E. cordifolia* which tolerates lime.

Hebe salicifolia is a species occurring also in southern New Zealand but has been introduced from Chile; it has handsome foliage and white or lilac flowers and is the parent of many hybrids. It is hardy in

the south in most winters and willingly reshoots if frosted or pruned. Two other delightful dwarf shrubby species flowering in June and July are *Jovellana violacea* with small, toothed leaves and violet flowers with darker markings, and *J. punctata* (fig. 15) with larger, less-toothed leaves and usually paler but equally spotted flowers. Best placed in a warm spot, perhaps against a wall but where there is moisture. In the wild it is frequently found in roadside ditches in moist habitats; a lot of variation in flower colour was observed, so more collections should be garden worthy.

Climbers

Eccremocarpus scaber is well known here. It occurs from Patagonia northwards in the Andes, is vigorous, and can be treated as a biennial or grown with other climbers in the shelter of a wall where it is perennial. The typical plant has tubular orange or red inch-long flowers but there are a number of selections; 'Tresco Cream' (fig. 16) a fine one. There are two species of *Mutisia* in the Daisy Family that are hardy in a sheltered spot; their main disadvantage is that they can look dead in winter with few green shoots. *M. oligodon* is an attractive, suckering, rather straggling plant to about 4 feet which can be grown over a shrub or framework. It has evergreen holly-like leaves and the pretty pink flowers appear throughout the summer. *M. ilicifolia* (fig. 17) is similar but



Fig. 14 *Eucryphia x nymansensis*.



Fig. 15 *Jovellana punctata*.



Fig. 16 *Eccremocarpus scaber* 'Tresco Cream'.



Fig. 17 *Mutisia ilicifolia*.

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Fig. 18 *Mitraria coccinea*.Fig. 19 *Berberidopsis corallina*.Fig. 20 *Nothofagus*.Fig. 21 *Lobelia bridgesii*.

to 6 feet, and has flowers with outer pink petals and yellow centres. *Ercilla volubilis* is a very vigorous climber, though it can be found as a creeper growing on the ground in the wild.

It is evergreen, the flowers appearing in spring in sessile spikes; the mass of pink anthers is the attraction. Perhaps not thought of as a climber is *Mitraria coccinea* (fig. 18), a lovely evergreen for a sheltered, shaded position with moisture-retentive soil where it can be trained up a wall to great effect or alternatively, as seen frequently in the wild, hanging down banksides in shaded spots by the roadside. The tubular flowers are orange-scarlet and appear throughout the summer. Among a number of introductions the selection 'Lake Caburgua' with larger flowers is said to be the hardiest form.

Tropaeolum speciosum is well known in association with yew hedges where it makes a flamboyant display in summer. Its thin stolons seem to require the dry conditions found under hedges and shrubs, not by any means being confined to yew. Its blue fruit offset by dark red fleshy calyces prolong the season. A rather more demure red-flowered climber is *Berberidopsis corallina* (fig. 19), an evergreen which flowers in summer with pendent racemes of deep scarlet flowers. It is best placed on a north-facing wall or in shade on neutral or acid soil; it has proved hardy for us and, although cut back by the recent cold winters, it has recovered well.

Southern beeches

One cannot think about Patagonian plants grown in the British Isles without a brief mention of the dominant native tree of the far south. *Nothofagus* (fig. 20) is a genus which bridges the gap between South America and Australasia: the 8 or more species occur in the region, ranging from low shrubs to fine trees of 60ft or more, and should be more widely grown in Britain. Three or more species are evergreen and the deciduous species often have fine autumn colour/tints.

Herbaceous plants

Pampas Grass (*Cortaderia selloana*) is perhaps the next Patagonian plant to come to mind after the Monkey Puzzle. Widely grown as lawn specimens or in big borders, its plume-like inflorescences persist through the winter and need cutting down in spring. There are various selections from dwarf forms to a range with variegated foliage. In our experience, the variegated forms make graceful tussocks through the winter but sadly did not withstand the recent very cold winters on open sites. Two other grasses must be mentioned in the *Bambusoideae*: *Chusquea culeou* (fig. 3) and *Chusquea gigantea*. The former is extremely variable in the wild, from low-growing 3ft tall in open, moist habitats to handsome 6ft stems; some of the variation in the wild is seen in our gardens. The latter, as its name implies, makes huge clumps and even groves of

very tall, stout canes usually as understorey in native forest.

Of all the Patagonian plants grown in British gardens, *Alstroemeria* is probably the most common. There are some 50 taxa of the genus in Chile, but only a small number occur in the southern regions. *A. aurea* (*A. aurantiaca*) and *A. ligtu* are the primary species which are parents to a host of hybrids, some incorporating species from further north, with Brazil the second centre of distribution of the genus. All are summer flowering, and *A. aurea*, especially once established, can be very vigorous. We have not been in the region in the southern summer but in spring have found in openings in the forest areas dense with young foliage suggesting that the species can be as enthusiastic in its native habitat.

There are two species of *Lobelia* we grow. The quite well known *L. tupa*, which is a magnificent plant, 3–4 ft high, with its strange red flowers found in open spaces in the forest in its native habitat; in the UK it is happy in deep moist soil in a sunny position and hardy certainly to the Midlands. *L. bridgesii* (fig. 21), a rare and threatened species in the wild, has pale-green lanceolate leaves and soft-pink petals and would appear to be less hardy.

Libertia chilensis Formosa Group (previously *L. formosa*) (fig. 22) makes a handsome clump of evergreen, iris-like foliage and sprays of white

flowers with yellow stamens; it thrives in the moister air of western gardens. A very garden-worthy dwarf *Libertia* we have found in Chile is doubtfully in cultivation. It has a looser habit and more open inflorescence than the New Zealand hybrid *L.* 'Nelson Dwarf'. The recently available *Pasithea caerulea* (fig. 23) resembles *Libertia* though in a different family; it has delightful blue flowers in a lax inflorescence and is not grown enough. It is happy in a sunny position in rich neutral soil and is easily raised from seed.

Gunnera tinctoria (fig. 24), widespread in wet areas in Patagonia, is a slightly smaller version of the south Brazilian *G. manicata* which has larger inflorescences and foliage. Both are well known and a subject for larger gardens. Both are susceptible to late frosts but easily protected by folding the dying leaves over the crowns in autumn. We have seen *G. tinctoria* severely damaged by frost in Argentina. *G. magellanica* (fig. 25) in contrast is but a few inches high with leaves little more than two inches across and is a creeping plant for moist places.

There are a large number of species of *Calceolaria* in the region, mainly small biennials or short-lived perennials easily raised from seed. There is also the woody *C. integrifolia* (fig. 26), not uncommon in cultivation, particularly in South-Western gardens; it has corymbs of



Fig. 22 *Libertia chilensis* Formosa Group.



Fig. 23 *Pasithea caerulea*.



Fig. 24 *Gunnera tinctoria*.



Fig. 25 *Gunnera magellanica*.

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Fig. 26 *Calceolaria integrifolia*.Fig. 27 *Azorella trifurcata*.Fig. 28 *Olsynium biflorum*.

yellow flowers from which some rather lurid orange-coloured selections have been bred and used in bedding schemes.

C. arachnoidea is a pleasing low-growing perennial with white, hairy foliage and violet-purple flowers. It is quite hardy but, as its foliage indicates, it is likely to succumb to excessive moisture so some protection is helpful.

Mimulus cupreus with its striking orange flowers is the parent, with the naturalised North American *M. guttatus*, of many dwarf hybrid Monkey Flowers. *Azorella trifurcata* (fig. 27) in the Carrot Family is frequently encountered on British rock or scree gardens and less frequently its close relative *Bolax gummifer*.

Ourisia coccinea is a creeping perennial needing a moisture-retentive spot in partial shade; it rewards us with its striking red tubular flowers from June to August. It seems remarkably hardy, surviving in our heavy clay for almost 10 years now.

Olsynium biflorum (fig. 28), a rhizomatous *Iridaceae*, has multi-headed flowering stems about a foot high with white or cream fragrant flowers marked with rich-purple veins; it is easy in a scree bed or trough and can be readily

raised from seed – a plant that could be more widely grown.

Mention should be made of *Grindelia chilensis*, a hardy, pleasing, yellow-flowered member of the Daisy Family, and *Oenothera stricta*, of which the paler form is more commonly cultivated. *Fragaria chilensis* is one of the parents of our cultivated strawberry. These and other species were covered in an earlier article [*The Hardy Plant* No.32 Vol. 2, 2011].

There are many other Patagonian plants rarely encountered in our gardens but grown by enthusiasts or in our Botanic Gardens. These include, for example, the range of Liliaceous bulbs *Rhodophiala*, the Iridaceous *Herbertia lahue* and a number of *Leucocoryne* (*Alliaceae*) of which the selection 'Andes' is very fine though the genus is not hardy and requires a frost-free greenhouse. *Flowers of the Patagonian Mountains* (AGS Field Guide 2013) by Martin Sheader and co-authors includes a number of plants, such as *Escallonia*, more associated with lowland areas. The book gives valuable information about habitats in the wild which should aid with cultivation and inspire some of us to attempt to grow more of the fascinating plants from this region. 🌸

Keith and Lorna Ferguson are retired professional botanists and life-long gardeners. They have a garden on neutral heavy clay in west Gloucestershire, travel widely, and have visited Patagonia regularly.