

The old ones are the best

Janet Sleep

I expect there was a time, a golden age, when Christmas crackers actually had something interesting inside them: presents you would actually want and conundrums that really exercised the brain. I came across one such the other day and repeat it here for those who are interested in such things:

What is...
Greater than God?
Worse than the Devil?
The poor have it
The rich want it
You die if you eat it¹

While I was failing to find the answer to this, it suddenly occurred to me that this particular puzzle probably has not just a beard, but a walking stick and a hearing aid too. If only I were old enough, there would be a fair chance that I would have heard this one before. Everything gets recycled eventually. That is probably why I find the Times crossword a whole lot easier to do now that I am closer to the age of the compilers. I can tell this because of the quantity of entirely out of date slang that is used amidst references to teddy boys, skiffle, blue streak and the like. A youngster wouldn't have the first idea. Add to this the fact that clues are recycled too and you can see that we oldies are ahead of the game. Now there are not many arenas in life where being older gives you an advantage, but crosswords and gardening happen to be two of them.

For a start, very little gardening knowledge is truly redundant after

¹The answer is at the end of the article.



Fig. 1 *Bergenia ciliata* is acting as a great green ruff to contain the froth of *Acer palmatum* 'Deshojo' and some home-grown *Sedum*.



Fig. 2 *Euphorbia nicaeensis* subsp. *nicaeensis* and *Hypericum olympicum* with *Sedum* and *Daphne* foliage and *Euphorbia myrsinites* going over on the right.

the passage of twenty or thirty years: what one learnt as a youngster is still likely to be useful and the older one is, the more of that knowledge has accumulated. Moreover, fashion comes in and out like the tide. Stay still long enough and the world will catch you up. It was thinking along these lines that reminded me once again of my first introduction to the writings of Gertrude Jekyll. This was a very long time ago and I was a newly qualified teacher, just about to get a home of my own for the first time, and with absolutely no ideas on gardening of any kind at all – think of me as not quite virgin soil.

The school library was about to throw out a whole lot of books that nobody was ever going to read again – not even the staff! What made me pick up that particular dusty, dark blue volume I shall never know. I am glad that I did, for it changed my life: it made me into a gardener. The book was Miss Jekyll's *Colour in the Flower Garden*, published by Country Life in 1908 – I think I put a couple of shillings into the charity box for it, having no clue that this was, in fact, a gardening classic and possibly even worth a bit. I have it open in front of me now. It is ages since I looked into it and, eerily, I could have sworn that the pictures were in a rather faded, imperfect colour. Actually, they are all black and white: all

the colour is in the writing. Her clarity and passion, her sense and sensibility, sing out at you from every page.

What is even more fascinating is the plant repertoire she uses. She loves plants that one would think are perfectly modern: *Yucca*, *Eryngium x oliverianum* and *amethystinum*, *Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii*, *Hosta* (except that she called them *Funkia*) and especially *Bergenia*, which she knew as *Megasea*. There are some particularly good



Fig. 3 *Euphorbia seguieriana* subsp. *niciciana* intermingled with *Eryngium bourgatii*.

photographs of the latter which, at one point, she has teemed up with pale, cloudlike masses of something she calls the wire-stemmed aster – probably *Aster divaricatus*. This partnership is ravishingly pretty, even in black and white: she wanted strong edges to frame her borders but loved plants, like this aster, that ramble and interweave. The big, rounded, ribbed and glossy leaves of the bergenia contain the extravagant flop of the laxer partner and contrast beautifully with it in shape and texture. Why I have not yet imitated this myself I do not know: I have slipped up here.

She did, however, get some messages through. In particular, her love of bergenias (fig. 1), and I have been collecting them ever since. This has been easier to do over recent years since the German hybridisers have been at work - there are now many more kinds to choose from. I take my hat off to these chaps: looking at a *Bergenia*, one would never think that growing from seed would be all that difficult. It is. The seed is very fine and, though it germinates well enough, tends to come up too thickly and the seedlings sit about all year as microscopics that have no desire to get to the next stage, even when you try to pot them on in clumpets, which works well enough with other tinies. No wonder *Bergenia* do not seem to self-sow. In the end, I got about half a dozen plants from ‘Pugsley’s Pink’ and, if I live long enough, I’ll see them flower one day. By the way, Pugsley it was that showed me that, like the rest of us, he does better with kind treatment. When cast into the outer darkness he sulks – wouldn’t you? In fact, it was nurseryman Mr Pugsley who used my all time favourite *Bergenia ciliata* (huge, softly hairy, deciduous leaves and blush pink flowers) to produce another favourite *B.* ‘Margery Fish’. This one has the large soft leaves of *ciliata* but without the fur and with a satin sheen. They are evergreen too.

It was Margery Fish, of course, who properly got me hooked on euphorbias,



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Fig. 4 *Rosa* ‘Desprez à Fleur Jaune’, an early, genuinely repeat-flowering, noisette rambler which likes a warm corner – a remnant of my old-rose infatuation. Its colour is an unstable creamy/peach but it is swooningly scented. Vita was captivated by anything with a romantic French name, so how would she have reacted to the clunkily named, *Rosa* ‘Parkdirektor Riggers’, seen recently on a wall at Sissinghurst?



Fig. 5 The climbing rose 'Madame Alfred Carrière' in the cottage garden at Sissinghurst. Vita could not have known *Euphorbia cornigera*, now grown here, but I think she would have approved.

foliage but, when it starts flowering, at the end of June, it will not stop until the frosts. It too is usefully small.

It is sometimes said that the pictures are better on radio. Certainly, TV has done little or nothing to give me garden inspiration. It is the printed word that has fired me up every time. In Mrs Fish's *We Made a Garden*, it was not just the battle to create something from nothing that swept me along, it was the constant rearguard action against the dreaded Walter, a pompous didact of a man. Bertie Wooster would have called him a pill, a wart and an excrescence. What Margery Fish practised was a form of subversive gardening, deeply attractive to my inner rebel.

But the day I became entirely lost to gardens and plants was the day I picked up Anne Scott-James's book, *Sissinghurst, The Making of a Garden*: the sheer

starting with *characias* and its variants. I loved her description – “they all have most beautiful evergreen, blue-green leaves, and those great lovebird-green heads”. Sold to Mrs. Sleep, drooling over the faded print: I think it was the love birds that did it and the thought that these flowers would start early and go on for months – greed being at root of the plant obsessive's psychology. If I had to pick two euphorbias to suit even the greediest gardener I think it would have to be *E. nicaeensis* subsp. *niciciana* (fig. 2) and *E. seguieriana* subsp. *niciciana* (fig. 3). Don't be put off by these dreadful names. *E. nicaeensis* has the palest blue/grey foliage and flowers usefully after *characias* in May/June in great flat heads of acid yellow, the whole plant making a neat mound at about 60cm: *niciciana* has much greener but more feathery

adventure of it; the wild romance; the extravagant over-the-topness of it all. (figs 4, 5 & 6) Vita simply swept me away: her taste, her likes and dislikes have had a deep and lasting effect. I too like things in overabundance: her ‘wapentakes and sokes’ of violas seemed none too many for me. It is because of Vita that I grow numbers of the hugely rampant rambler roses through our Irish yews and hollies and anywhere else I can find for them. I once had a visitor who asked how I got *Rosa* ‘Félicité Perpétué’ to do that climbing trick so neatly. “Try stopping them”, was my reply. I am still doing it. Recently I have planted *Rosa* ‘Goldfinch’ on a tower and it was only when I reread Vita’s *In Your Garden Again*, the reprint of her pithy and persuasive Observer articles, that I find she recommended this very rose. Had the seed lain dormant all these years, or has she been sending me messages from the grave? And was I persuaded to plant *Indigofera pendula* recently because the plant’s merits are without question – elegant, narrow habit, delicate fern-like foliage and chains of rosy violet flowers from June onwards – or is it that because she liked this plant she subtly influenced me to like it too.

Never underestimate the power of the printed word. I am not talking of catalogues here. If the definition of a goldmine is ‘a hole in the ground with a liar sitting on top’, then that of a catalogue is probably something like – ‘text: to be written and read with the aid of rose-tinted spectacles only’. No, the garden writing that really grabs is founded in reality but with a strong dose of fantastic possibility thrown in. I could never have escaped from the pull of the old roses given my devotion to Vita and her works, but it was Michael Gibson who caused



Fig. 6 Too much of Sissinghurst in 2009 is horribly tight and tidy, but Vita would have approved the exuberance of the white garden. Note that while *Crambe cordifolia* and *Chamerion angustifolium* ‘Album’ are genuinely white, *Gillenia trifoliata* is really quite pink.



Fig. 7 Once you have caught the 'climbers up everything' bug, it can get out of hand. Here is *Humulus lupulus* 'Aureus' attempting to swamp an old Juniper.

has the palest pink of crumpled, very double flowers which bleach unmercifully in the June sunshine. The rest of the year it is utterly boring and does not deserve its front-line position. "Out you go", I said. "No", it replied firmly, and has been defying me ever since. I am still digging it out after six years.

Here I am arrived at the end of my allotted space and I haven't even mentioned The Master yet – Christopher Lloyd of course. He would need an article all to himself. Who could resist his acid wit, brilliant observation, and magic with words. If I have achieved anything in the gardening line, it is because of these gardener-writers who passed on their loves, hates and passions to me like a virus of the best sort. I was once asked by a neighbour where I learned about gardening and when I answered, "from books", I got a look of pure disbelief. Even recently I was asked which garden course I had attended to learn about garden design. They simply would not credit that the printed word was all you would ever need... Ah well. Oh, and the answer to that riddle is 'nothing', of course. 🐛

me to plant the rose 'Fantin Latour'. True, the name evoked something more. There are only two pictures I remember from my days of being dutifully taken round a Manchester art gallery: one was 'Christ, Light of the World' (all garish and Pre-Raphaelite but deeply meaningful and all that) and the other was a bowl of roses in true chocolate box style painted by Fantin-Latour. Guess which I liked best? But I digress: let me rather quote from *Shrub Roses, Climbers and Ramblers*:

'Even if I knew that the world was going to end tomorrow, I would plant 'Fantin-Latour' just the same'.

Resist that if you can. The hairs simply stood up on my neck when I read this and a delicious shiver went right down the spine: the money was metaphorically spent before I had closed the book.

As a matter of fact I no longer have this rose. What could live up to this billing? It

Janet Sleep has found time, between carrying cans of water through the patch of Norfolk Desert that represents home, to discover a newer gardener writer, Daniel J Hinkley.