

Vertical ground cover

Anita Chapman

*I know a bank where the wild thyme blows
where oxlips and the nodding violet grows.*

We too have a bank, but there all resemblance to Shakespeare's idyllic view ends.

When we moved to our present home we did not appreciate quite how steep our back garden (if you can call it that) is. Our bungalow is built on a large terrace carved out of the hillside in a very beautiful Welsh valley. Most of our half-acre plot is in front of the house; behind, a bank rises from the terrace to nearly roof height, retained only by a 1m high block wall. The total area is about 5m from the wall to the top and 46m long. The soil is clay with a lot of slate – there was once a slate quarry above us. Average rainfall is about 108cm and at an altitude of approximately 209m we are regularly either in cloud or bathed in fine mist. The steep-sided narrow valley provides shelter from strong winds, but from November to February, if the sun shines, we get just three hours sunshine in the middle of the day.

The bank can be roughly divided into three uneven-sized sections. The right-hand corner, the steepest part, is impossible to cultivate in any traditional sense. This is the area we see daily when taking our dog for his early morning walk. The middle section lies behind the house and is the view from our dining room; it gets no sun for seven months of the year and can be dreary. The left-hand section, by far the largest area, enjoys all the available sun for most of the day. Fronted by a small lawn, it can be seen without craning your neck. In contrast, most of the middle section can be seen only by looking skywards.

Some twenty years ago the whole garden had been landscaped, although little maintenance had been done since, leaving us with an area covered in dense shrubbery. Assorted berberis, rhododendrons and a thicket of dogwood and *Rosa rugosa* jostled with cotoneasters, an incongruous tree heather and *Clethra alnifolia*; various shrubby potentillas, weigelas and sundry other shrubs completed the tangled array.



Part of the back slope.



Rowan and bird cherry had colonised.



This rhodo flourishes without its *ponticum!*

Threading its way through this labyrinth were swathes of *Vinca major*, while brambles were colonising from the unoccupied property above. And everything was smothered in convolvulus. Furthermore, gravity having triumphed, it all leaned towards the terrace below. You might expect shrubs to grow upwards towards the light – but the bank is so steep that gravity takes them outwards as well.

The middle section had been colonised by rowan and a bird cherry, *Prunus padus*, and a once -coppiced hazel had been allowed to regrow into a multi-stemmed tree. Their seedlings, together with those of birch, ash and field maple, threatened to turn the whole area into an impenetrable thicket. A low-growing, suckering cotoneaster had spread from the steepest corner to cover an area of about 20 feet horizontally, while its treelike cousin had self-seeded everywhere. We could have left all this to its own devices but, being gardeners, we took it as a challenge!

My husband managed to dispatch the dogwood and *Rosa rugosa* and together we gradually cleared the matted foliage, uncovering a few woody heathers, a *Euonymus fortunei* ‘Emerald ‘n’ Gold’, a pale pink hardy bush fuchsia and a white *Daboecia cantabrica* amongst others.

A number of small plants also made themselves known when the shrubbery was cut down: *Centaurea montana*, *Pulmonaria officinalis*, *Bergenia cordifolia*, *Lamium galeobdolon* and *Persicaria affinis*. I recently acquired a second-hand copy of Margery Fish’s book *Ground Cover Plants*, published in 1964. Many of these plants are listed, suggesting that whoever planted the bank for the previous owners knew what they were doing.

After cutting back the self-sown saplings we treated them, not always successfully, with stump killer, as digging out large roots was not

an option. The stumps, have proved useful, however, providing hand or footholds as required.

The problems of cultivating such steep land soon became apparent. Everything has to be done by first climbing on to the wall, in my case using a ladder! You have to take everything you may need with you, and remember to descend to the same point!

The steepest parts are negotiable only when it is neither too wet nor too dry, otherwise you're in danger of sliding down.

An unforeseen hazard is vicious ants nesting in the bank. (Slow worms take advantage of bare soil to sun themselves.) Keeping it weed-free has been a challenge to which we have proved not equal. It is not possible to balance buckets on the bank so my technique is simply to throw the weeds on to the terrace below and tidy up later!

Having cleared as best we could, we set about trying to make the area as attractive as possible. We had no grand plan in mind – we realised that it was never going to be a thing of beauty nor a joy forever, but it could be brighter and require as little maintenance as possible.

At first our choice of plants was led by those we found attractive. We have learnt lessons, and now our planting is dictated by pragmatism.

The steepest corner of the bank was already clothed with two types of cotoneaster and given the 1-in-2 slope there was no choice but to leave well enough alone. It was, however, such a dismal place to pass every morning: I just had to do something with it. Anything planted would have to go at the bottom of the bank, just above the retaining wall, in the eighteen inches or so I could reach to clear. *Hedera colchica* 'Dentata Variegata' seemed a good choice to scramble over the shrubbery, so I begged a rooted piece from a friend. After five years there is small patch of it at the bottom, otherwise it is not seen again until you go around to the top of the bank where it is heading off into the woodland having made its way up underneath all the cotoneasters. I tried a *Lonicera periclymenum*, a cheap and cheerful supermarket specimen, and for winter colour *Jasminum nudiflorum*. The honeysuckle disappeared for three years only to reappear triumphantly at the top this year, so high you have to crane your neck to see it. The jasmine is finally established after three attempts.

I also planted a climbing rose, 'Masquerade'. It put up one very vigorous shoot, which had no intention of staying close to the bank but wanted to trap anyone walking too close. I had to tie it in parallel to the retaining wall about two feet up. With its main stem horizontal it flowers profusely, but after three years has not put out many shoots as replacements. Still the dull corner does have some colour now. At the top of the wall (at the base of the bank) I put in a *Bergenia* 'Abendglut', a few snowdrops and surplus



Euonymus and *vinca* set the theme.



Adding lightness



Shiny bergenia leaves add light

erythroniums. A native fern has conveniently joined them and in spring the dominant weed is the native cranesbill, which is quite colourful.

Where the slope levels out to wall height at the side of the house I planted *Salix alba* var. *vitellina* 'Britzensis', *Rubus biflorus* and *Rubus cockburnianus* 'Goldenvale'. As this area catches the morning sun in winter, the aim was to brighten up the view when we returned from walking the dog. Not one of my better ideas – they have now grown so big it is difficult to get in to cut them down, a necessary task if they are to fulfil their role of providing winter colour.

From my experiences in trying to get winter jasmine established, (did I mention my complete failure with several plantings of *Clematis montana* in the same area), I learnt quite early on the problems of planting on a steep slope.

One problem is water, and watering, when plants are out of easy reach. Water (and nutrients) drain away too fast. I now

plant only in autumn, when at least we can rely on abundant Welsh winter rain to help plants establish. Then there is the problem of soil retention. We realised what difficulties soil erosion posed when we found one of the original rhododendrons with its roots exposed, resulting in the ponticum rootstock growing and flowering very vigorously. It took two seasons of rigorous attention before the graft was healthier than its host. Eventually I'm sure we'll lose the fight because it's not possible to cover up the rootstock.

To combat erosion I finally came up with a system of digging a hole and adding slow release fertiliser, water retaining gel and compost; it has to be a much deeper hole than you might imagine to ensure the plant is upright, that is pointing towards the sky, and the downhill side of the rootball is not exposed. At the downhill edge to the hole I wedge a piece of slate. Using young plants works best, especially as this is not the place for choice hybrids or large holes! Supermarket packs for £2 to £3 have proved very successful – it's surprising what a range of shrubs can be purchased with the weekly shop. The downside is that, being small, they do not all survive wet and cold Welsh winters, and they need to be kept weed-free while they establish.

The view from our dining room window includes the *Euonymus* so its bright splash of gold has set the theme. The bank here doesn't rise too steeply for the first metre,

making it possible both to plant in it and to enjoy the results of our work. I added *Ilex crenata* 'Golden Gem', *Lonicera nitida* 'Lemon Beauty' and *Hypericum olympicum*. A little higher up are a blue-flowered hebe and a couple of *Hypericum* 'Hidcote'. In place of the *Vinca major*, I planted the variegated form to keep the area bright. *H. olympicum*, which in a previous garden I had been unable to



Buttercups add a dash of gold!

eradicate, has kept itself to itself. I suspect it does not get the chance to set seed, which is a pity, but that's plants for you! When you hope they will spread they don't oblige. Creeping Jenny was already growing so I added a *Campanula poscharskyana* and some assorted geraniums. The drawback is that you have to climb the bank, treading on the plants near the base, in order to chop off dead foliage. *Erica x darleyensis* 'Kramer's Rote' and *Calluna vulgaris* 'Gold Haze' both add winter colour. *Taxus baccata* 'Summergold', a prostrate form, and *Cotoneaster atropurpureus variegatus* are planted too high up to be seen now that the other shrubs have grown. Both were bought before we realised the limitations of the bank. *Rhododendron* 'President Roosevelt' was an accidental good choice, purchased because it was two for £5 in a market; it is variegated, low-growing and, as I found out recently, recommended for banks. Unfortunately only one survived, as at the time we had not perfected our planting technique.

The middle section, with the bird cherry and rowan, presented an added problem of dry deep shade. An evergreen hebe, several shrubby potentillas, a dark-leaved weigela and a spiraea were already established, although neither the potentilla nor the weigela could be said to be thriving. I added a *Rubus tricolor* for its shiny leaves, a few variegated ivies and half a dozen pachysandras bought from a well-known DIY chain. Sadly the pachysandras emulated the *Hypericum olympicum* and refused to become the thugs they were said to be, but maybe given time, if the weeds don't swamp them first, they will spread.

The final section, which gets much more light, had several lovely rhododendrons and azaleas already. Having learned the lesson not to plant interesting shrubs which will never be seen, I chose half a dozen assorted prostrate junipers, a mixture of golds, greens and blues, which my husband planted at the top of the slope in the hope, forlorn as it turned out, that they would grow and smother the weeds. They are growing, but slowly. Lower down we planted assorted camellias, more azaleas, several cistus, pieris, *Photinia x fraseri* 'Red Robin', *Choisya ternata* Sundance, *Physocarpus opulifolius* 'Diabolo', an *Acer palmatum* var. *dissectum*, various hebes and some box.



The sunny section – colourful, if overgrown.

Some were surplus cuttings, others were cheap and cheerful supermarket plants. The aim was to cover the area as fast as possible before the creeping buttercup, which emerged when the dogwood was cleared, could gain the upperhand. Most of the shrubs have done well with the exception of the choisya and a *Cistus x hybridus* (syn. *pulverulentus*) ‘Sunset’, which succumbed to last winter’s wet and freezing conditions, while a *Cistus corbariensis*, though slightly frost-damaged, has fully recovered. It became obvious that shrubs alone were not going to cover the area and smother weeds, at least not in the short term, so reinforcements were called for. *Hypericum calycinum* should have been a valuable candidate but is only just starting to spread.

Conversely, *Acaena buchananii*, planted in a dry and sunny spot below a large conifer, is certainly thriving, as is *Euphorbia cyparissias*, probably ‘Fens Ruby’, a small piece of which was given to me by friend as being ‘good for shady places’! Now there are two thugs. And the buttercup? That has done well also and I have decided to let it be – it is pretty in flower and it smothers other weeds, which is after all what ground cover is about!

Five years on, what have we achieved? Well, we have colour and variety through the year, but the weeds and brambles are advancing and, because there are so many young shrubs, climbing up to weed is very difficult. Clearing at the end of the season is the most that can be done, with forays with long loppers keeping the worst of the brambles at bay. I am learning to live with the buttercups and cranesbill while wild strawberries certainly make good and quite attractive ground cover with their shiny leaves and red fruit, as does orange hawkweed, *Pilosella aurantiacum*. I would never choose to plant them, but they do serve a purpose. I still look at the bank and imagine it with choice specimens but that is not possible. This is not a garden for our dotage, we are both long retired, so we are hoping to move to pastures newer, and flatter! 🐼

Anita Chapman and her husband Mike are members of the Shropshire Group and, although by no means novice gardeners when they joined in 2001, they have since come to realise just how little they knew. They say this large and friendly Group have taught them so much – they will miss them when they move, hopefully to Brittany, where a milder climate should allow them to spend more time gardening.