

The learning curve

Val Bourne

Being a fully paid up member of Plantaholics Anonymous means that I have grown hundreds of different plants. But it also means that I've developed a ruthless streak. If a plant proves a poor performer I evict it without a thought. So over the years many have been replaced in the quest for the perfect plant. I often say I've kissed a lot of frogs (metaphorically speaking) in order to find my 'princes' - the plants I couldn't be without.



This process is likely to continue for we live in exciting times. Many plants are being collected by modern plant hunters like Dan Hinkley and Bleddyn Wynn-Jones. I've just bought *Beesia deltophylla* from Nick Macer's Pan Global Plants down in South Gloucestershire, another good place to acquire exciting finds, although many are woody plants not strictly the remit of Hardy Planters. This Chinese woodlander has heart-shaped, shiny leaves and starry, buttermilk-white flowers that resemble those of a heuchera – though a botanist would probably disagree because it's a member of the *Ranunculaceae*. The seed pods look rather menacing and perhaps Nick had rather too many on sale for comfort. After all, it does say on his label 'proving very amenable to cultivation', which is probably nursery code for self-seeding nuisance. So we will see if the starry flowers are worth it.

But I bought *Beesia deltophylla* primarily for its black stems. Black stems seduce me: they have a wiry definition. I have always admired *Aster divaricatus* for this very reason. Gertrude Jekyll used the starry-white, August-flowering aster for its ability to flop over bergenia foliage, and a flopper has it uses – it needn't be hoisted up like a bustle. Besides, the deviating dark stems and emerald-tinted leaves please me long before the flowers swoon. This plant works in quiet areas of the garden and I use it as a follow-up act with forms of *Viola cornuta*. It can also be Chelsea-chopped if it gets too amorous and reaches out a little too enthusiastically.

Forms of *A. divaricatus* seem to vary. Some are rather beefier than others, so try to find a diminutive clone. I also like the black-stemmed, metre-tall, September-flowering *Aster laevis* 'Calliope' for its dark presence. But it's far from diminutive.



Carthusian pink

The equally tall, dark-purple-stemmed *Heliopsis helianthoides* var. *scabra* ‘Summer Nights’ has small orange buttons to set off the dark leaves and stems. Seeds (which may be variable) can be bought from Mr Fothergills but some nurseries have excellent forms from division.

Undoubtedly my acquisitive nature has undermined my sense of style, if I ever had one. And although I admire the lavender and box-lined beds that surround a mass-planting of a hundred pink roses I can’t quite manage to do it. I don’t have enough space to plant in square metres either. But I have managed to unite my

mixed ragbag of planting by using certain plants throughout different areas. Uniting the planting is the best I can hope for and (like many gardeners) I discovered the technique more by accident than design.

I fell in love with ponytail grass (*Stipa tenuissima*) and the affair developed. I first saw it, quivering amongst a berry sorbet of achilleas along with the drumstick allium (*A. sphaerocephalon*), in a show garden at Hampton Court many years ago. The moving swathe of bleached blond hair infiltrated the stiff-stemmed achilleas and played over their platformed heads like tidal water lapping over a rocky shore. But the drumstick alliums, the ones with the neat heads of green that flush to maroon, were planted deeper so that the heights of all three correlated. I knew it was a cheat. But I still admired it.

I immediately knew that my then gravel garden (which was full of stiff-stemmed eryngiums, achilleas and shrubby lavenders) needed a softer presence and I bought five plants and slotted them in that summer. They swirled through autumn and kept a presence through winter and then I combed them to get rid of the dross. The following spring new leaves appeared, grass-green, and they collected the moisture like a jewelled optic-fibre lamp. By then I had bought a packet of seeds and by early summer had dotted many more about and they took the eye over the whole area.

But my passion changed that year and (just like Toad) I moved on to the Carthusian pink (*Dianthus carthusianorum*), a willowy species with long stems topped with a cluster of clear-pink flowers. Think sweet William on an 800-calorie-a-day diet and you’ll be able to conjure it up. This is also variable, but the best forms are neatly formed and not too tall. This grassy-leaved dianthus produces tight, dark buds and they open (one flower at a time quite often) to produce weeks of interest. The torpedo-shaped seed pods are dark and interesting and just as beguiling as the flowers. Saving the seed is easy and new plants can be raised for next year. But with good drainage and an open situation the plants will overwinter. I also grow a shorter

version, a different species, *D. cruentus*.

I added a short achillea with putty-coloured flowers and a running habit – *A. nobilis* subsp. *neilreichii*. The colour reminded me of the insides of custard creams – forbidden fruit. It romped effectively, but not too worryingly, and its biscuit-blandness gave my Carthusian pink more sparkle than it had already. Dark blue agapanthus and the silver sculptures of the self-seeding biennial *Eryngium giganteum* (or Miss Willmott’s Ghost) also chimed in. They looked their best in decadent September decay, seen against the now harvest-palette of *Stipa tenuissima*.



© Val Bourne

Now I’m also using dark penstemons, especially *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Ferner Osten’ the wine-red ‘Garnet’ (which has reverted to its German name – ‘Andenken an Friedrich Hahn’). It was first introduced into Britain by Alan Bloom in the 1930s along with the redder ‘Firebird’ (now known as ‘Schoenholzeri’). Both are still worth a place despite the plethora of new penstemons emerging from Pensham, near Pershore in Worcestershire.

The stipa was my introduction to grasses and now I’m using as many as I can in mixed planting – especially tall ones. I was inspired by the miscanthus trial at RHS Wisley. It was tucked away at Deers Farm, so many will have missed it, but I have never forgotten the sight of a hundred varieties all in full flow in early September.

The earliest varieties of *Miscanthus* were raised by Ernst Pagels in the 1950s, after he had the idea of growing *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Gracillimus’ in a heated greenhouse to encourage early enough flowers for a seed crop. Germany (like Britain) is too cool for it to flower in time to set seeds in the open. When Pagels grew the seeds, the resulting progeny were variable and his original seedlings laid the foundation for many modern varieties. His nursery sent 25 varieties to the Wisley trial (1998- 2003) and out of the 15 AGMs awarded, his received ten. The crimson-tinted ‘Ferner Osten’ and the rose-pink ‘Undine’ are probably my Pagels’ favourites.

Gertrude Jekyll would have been pleased. The green and yellow ‘Zebrinus’ (which she grew as *Eulalia japonica*) also won an AGM. It’s more graceful than the similar but rigidly erect ‘Strictus’ (also AGM), and a better doer than the white and green striped var. *condensatus* ‘Cosmopolitan’ (also AGM) which hangs in the balance here – surviving but not shining. A little like me! 🍷

Val Bourne is an award-winning writer, author and lecturer.
(www.valbourne.co.uk).