

Garden pests

Chloris

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Malva moschata f. *alba*

No, not the kind with wings and an indecent number of legs, but the kind we plant ourselves very often. The self-seeders, questing rooters, and floppers given to lying down on their neighbours and smothering them. Some of these we import ourselves, knowingly taking risks that bankers might jib at, accepting a gift from an unscrupulous acquaintance, or buying on impulse at a charity plant stall; and some we inherit with the site.

Ferns came with this garden: mostly *Athyrium filix femina* and *Dryopteris filix mas*, with the odd sprinkling of *Polystichum aculeatum* and colonies

here and there of Harts tongue on the stones of retaining walls. They grow very quickly, and before you can say “pteridophyte”, a corydalis or a diascia has disappeared forever under the predaceous fronds and horse-hair roots of a fern that was only 15cm high last season. Progeny appear in the retaining walls, at the side of steps, in the cracks of paving. And getting rid of them is not easy, though last year’s weather did rid us of one or two neglected geriatrics which have survived only as brown lumps of dead foliage.

Other philoprogenitive types include *Malva moschata*, the musk mallow, which came in from next door (whence it has – unfairly – disappeared) and has largely taken over the upper garden. The beds near the house are at present frothing with lovely pink, or this year mostly white, silken blossoms. Another ubiquitous pest is *Hypericum olympicum*, which sets the upper garden ablaze in early summer with small hemispherical clumps of large golden flowers. Destroying them means reducing the pollen provided for my bumblebees, which forage eagerly among their froth of anthers.

The bumblebees also enfeeble my resistance to that 2m, gawky pest the teasel; I think that I should be resolute here, banish it and grow more *Eryngium grandiflorum* for a more refined form of the prickly, multi-faceted job-location

that the bees seem to like. It is not quite a pest, except that its tap-rooted infants are hard to transplant successfully and their germination in close-knit colonies suggests that they see themselves as ground-cover plants though they haven't the physique for it.

Some plants are pests because they have found a place ideally suited to colonisation by their kind. The 'back bankside' opposite our back door is such a place, irrigated – not to say inundated – by run-off from the excessive car-washing of our late neighbours up above. But even without this additional moisture there was always water seeping or running down to the open drain at the foot of the slope, making the rock-built bank ideal for astilbes and wet-growing primulas. It is hard to regard these lovely things as 'pests' even here, but I do find it tedious having to remove colonies of young *P. florindae* from the kitchen drain and to scrape tiny astilbes from mossy stones or the join between the concrete and the stone walls; true, there would always be weeds lurking about there, but to say that I'd be removing a succession of infant groundsel and bittercress merely underlines the point.

Every now and then I decide *Aquilegia vulgaris* to be a pest for eradication this year; and each time it produces a race of such beauty and delicate colouring that it becomes the jewel of the late spring garden and is much admired even by me, until I am thoughtfully removing the myriad rattling, seed-bearing stems in a summer clean-up of the beds where it flourishes.

Some plant pests just defy you. No matter how often it has been dug up because of its floppy habit, *Catananche caerulea* has returned the following year in the same place, as vigorous (and floppy) as ever. It lies down and in non-violent protest overlays everything within a couple of yards of its root. Similarly, a nepeta has almost closed to traffic the front steps. I am inclined to classify as 'pests' all plants which require crutches and straitjackets – sticks and strings and legs with rings and Y-shaped things – not just because of how the plants look if they can't hide their props decently, but also the problem of storing over winter their shapeless, disintegrating bundles of crutches and zimmers.

My latest pest is a nondescript little New Zealand grass – a sedge (*Carex comans*?), a pale brownish-grey little thing given to us years ago by a 'friend'. It always looked dead and we quickly realised that we really wouldn't mind if it were, and got rid of it. Or thought we had. That was some years ago, but this year, in the manner of garden pests, it has returned without warning and is colonising the path near the hens' enclosure. When it first came it reproduced by seed, but was quickly cut off; reincarnated this year, it has not been allowed to set seed but is showing its root power by browning over the green path at olympic speed. I exercise a resolve to pull/dig up at least five of these clumps each time I am near the hen run, but the pest is winning. 🍷