

A little ridiculous

Martin Spray



‘Little things, ridiculous things’, wrote the English poet Edward Shanks, ‘shall move me to smiles or tears or verse.’¹

Jane and I have just returned from a local nursery with a box of plants including *Helleborus foetidus*, *Lathyrus latifolius*, *Geranium x magnificum*, and *Caryopteris x clandonensis*. I mention this first, in the hope that it will help counter any impression that I shun plants unless they are all-green (or brown), and have obscure little flowers (or none).

It is glaringly obvious that some types of plant are persistently popular. Plants such as rose and narcissus: in the 2006-07 *Plant Finder* there were respectively 27 and 13 pages of them. Their reputation for beauty is long established. In the same tome there are nearly a hundred forms of *Miscanthus sinensis*, and it has only recently come over the horizon – in the first *Plant Finder*, of 1987, there were seven – but it seems it has already become quite widely appreciated. Or... is it just part of an ornamental grass fashion, to fade away in the shadows while the Old Favourites continue in the sunshine? Certainly, grasses are very unlike roses, and their beauty seems to come as an acquired taste rather than a ‘given’. And yet...

I do not doubt that there are features of – for example – *Rosa* and *Narcissus* that make them almost universally attractive, even though I’m not sure why I myself don’t find either especially captivating! I also wouldn’t dispute the ‘acquired taste’ factor involved in calling *Eulalia* grasses ‘beautiful’; and I suspect a ‘Jones’s’ factor is helping their sales figures. Yet roses in particular stay popular partly for sentimental reasons.

Yet isn’t there something beautiful to be found in *any* plant, though you may not notice/find/look for it? Of course, like people, some are more beautiful than others; indeed, with some (as with people) one must look carefully and closely to see their beauty. But the looking can be well rewarded. I have tried to write about this before².



In spite of humankind’s efforts to make the world an ugly place (so it seems), there is plenty of beauty around – but some of it is subtle. Some is *very* subtle.

However, some is blatant, but we either can’t see it or we ignore it because of other, less desirable, features it comes with. Does any plant flower more beautifully in your garden than the *Taraxacum* defiantly rooted in the path or lawn? I, too, have far (far) too many of this particular Good Thing; yet, like some other gardeners, I tend to have regrets when spudding them out³.

¹ Edward Shanks *Sonnets on separation vi*, from *Poems*, 1916.

² I think it started with *A meditation on Death*, in Vol.13 (1991), but I want to follow on from the end of *Subtle Obscurities and Knotty Problems*, in Vol. 29 No. 1 (2008).

³ Febrin LePadden wisely admires them as pot-plants (*Containing the wild* Vol. 28 No. 1). Febrin, you are not alone in enjoying all plants without distinction – though I bet you, too, have favourites.

‘Dandelion’ is not a very precise name. There are maybe 250 named species in Britain⁴. Your garden may have many different ones. The differences between them are subtle to say the least, and few experts can tell them apart. Maybe someone is busy growing a collection of them all. Would that be one step closer to fanaticism than, say, collecting ferns or cultivars of *Sempervivum*: a devotion to subtlety? Are they not all beautiful in flower?



This is all about subtlety, so ferns may be a good case to point to. I have had a fondness for them since childhood, when I learned to make ‘dinner plate’ gardens of moss, infant ferns, and small stones. It is frustrating but amusing to look around plant centres and even nurseries, and find things labelled with no more than ‘hardy fern’, presumably because they are thought to look so alike. Yes: like people, many are quite like each other; but as you come to know them, they become recognisably distinct. More or less. Amongst a group of *Dryopteris affinis* and *filix-mas*, native ‘male’ (buckler) ferns, and a few of their varieties, I have planted a single *D. dickinsii*. I need to find its label. Why? Because without that, I can’t tell which it is. And of course, these plants don’t have those identification features we so heavily rely on: flowers. One has to work at getting to know them. My point is it is worth doing so, even if you can’t remember who you are peering at. It is pleasing when I find someone who enjoys our fernery, and slightly frustrating when others don’t – ah well, chacun à son gout... To the keenest ones, I show a small tuft of green hair in the dampness under the rainwater tap: a dinky horsetail, *Equisetum scirpoides*. Even I keep forgetting it’s there.

It’s also a pleasure to find that a visitor shares an interest in *Hedera helix* – the common ivy. Common it may be, but how varied! I keep browsing the Fibrex catalogue, which lists over a hundred varieties, wondering where to fit in a few more. But look no further than the leaves of ivies in the wild, varying from site to site, plant to plant, and node to node. The diversity of shape is fascinating; but how often do we notice such details? Outside the kitchen door is a selection of cvs ‘Anita’, ‘Ferney’, ‘Duckfoot’ and ‘Tripod’, and a couple of ‘wild’ specimens, all in a 30cm pot; all greens, and not a flower in prospect.

I *do* like flowers. *Mibora minima* is a rare native of Britain’s sand-dunes. I acquired a few seeds forty years ago, and my father kept a tiny colony ‘ticking over’ in a corner of a raised heather bed for twenty years or more, by which time I had established two even smaller colonies – on a wall-top and in a greenhouse pan – in my own garden. I neglected the pan, and the wall-top crevices filled up with advancing sempervivums. *Mibora* is an ephemeral – it grows for a few weeks, flowers, and dies. Commonly about 3cm tall in flower, ‘inconspicuous’ overemphasises its presence.

Another favourite I acquired about the same time is a bit of a thug, soaring to 3 m

⁴ So-called apomictic species, in which seeds develop without fertilisation.

before it flowers, and dies. *Heracleum mantegazzianum*, the giant hogweed, is now on the Wanted Dead or Alive list, and I've been persuaded to stop growing it.

I miss both plants. I miss the dainty subtlety of the one and the almost manic exuberance of the other. One might say that 'minima' refers to the sand-grass's impact; its admirers wouldn't. *Heracleum*, of course, is Herakles, a.k.a. Hercules – a name not quite so apt for the British native *H. sphondylium*! I am sometimes reminded that both parts of the name hog-weed are apt, and that quite a few other plants are more attractive/flamboyant/interesting/docile; but I *still* like them.



Gardeners tend to keep too stark a boundary between 'weed' and 'wanted'. Have you managed to rid your garden of *Cardamine hirsuta*, the hairy bittercress? Nor have I. It's an annoying (rather than noxious) weed, which we try to keep at bay at least in the vegetable area. In a few situations, though, I welcome it – in modest quantity, and for a short period early in the year. It has a nice habit of flowering very early, as tiny plants, amongst the pads of moss on the top of a breezeblock wall, just below eye-height. This habitat in summer is a 'forest' of the short, annual, fern-grass *Catapodium rigidum*, well worth a close-up glance, en passant. But I probably give this habitat most attention (still, I admit, not a huge amount) very early in spring, when passing the wall brings me face-to-face with a sort of landscape-in-miniature, growing drought-tolerant mosses, stonecrop, tiny red rosettes of herb Robert (*Geranium robertianum*) and fresh green ones of its cv. 'Celtic White'. This lilliputian scene is enlivened by the minuscule, bright, simple white flowers of the despised hairy bittercress. And I mean mini: the petals are at most 3mm.⁵

Would it not, in this situation, be better called *fairy* bittercress? I must admit my attention is soon diverted to the rich pink, short-lasting *Cardamine pentaphylla*; then to white, long-lasting *C. trifolia*, also in shade in the fernery; and then to the swarms of pale pink and occasional white ladies' smocks, *C. pratensis*, sharing parts of the rough grass with the paigles⁶ for several weeks from early April. I admit all of them cheer me as I wander around the garden, and *of course* these perennial species are all in a class beyond the dreams of little *hirsuta*. Yet still that annoying little weed, in the dawn of the year, has enough charm to make it worth stopping for. As the ladies' smocks fade, another *Cardamine* becomes noticeable – in a quiet way. The narrow-leaved bittercress, *C. impatiens*, is a visitor from a wet part of the adjacent forest, which fills up some disturbed soil in light shade. I like its rather distinctively spiky, upstanding, ferny foliage, lighter green than the surrounding plants. The population growing here usually has no petals.



Gardeners grow what they grow for a variety of reasons, by no means primarily – let alone only – for how the plants look. Take *H. sphondylium*, the wild hogweed. Aesthetically it is a poor shadow of *H. mantegazzianum*, but I like the

⁵ There are also petal-less forms. This New Zealand migrant sometimes grows no leaves and but a single flower.

⁶ Oxlips, *Primula elatior*.

effect – a fairly subtle one – of a handful of each of its green-stemmed and purplish-stemmed forms growing together in the company of a tall, woolly, late-flowering, wildling mint. But I grow it mainly because an impressive diversity of insects find the blossoms attractive, including moths and butterflies that *we* find attractive, at a time when other sources of nectar are waning. Is that not sufficient reason?

When it is time to decapitate the hogweeds to preclude a take-over, the subtly bluey-mauvey-grey mint⁷ is the most popular thing in the garden with later autumnal butterflies, wasps, beetles and flies. Those last butterflies are especially delightful, though their colours are outdone by some of the beetles and flies. Have you watched flies feeding? Few are flamboyant, but some are bright as jewels. About the brightest are greenbottles; and because the Forest of Dean is sheep country, there are plenty around here – unfortunate for the sheep, because greenbottle maggots are flesh-eaters. Such is the reality of ecology. It does not stop the flies being beautiful visitors.



We are spoiled for choice, and dazzled by the fizz and flamboyance of all that choice. In his fascinating 400-year history of an English garden⁸, George Ordish imagines how one of its earlier occupants might have scoured the local countryside for unusual forms of wild violets, to dig up and grow together. Doubtless, if she had had access to even a thousandth of the contents of *The Plant Finder*, she would have scorned common violets. Yet, while we are eagerly eyeing the subtlest difference between *Inyorfacia florida* (!) varieties ‘Brightest of All’ and ‘Brighter Still’, and wondering if we should get the new ‘Brighter than Brightest’, the rumbustious dandelions, the humble violet, the common ivy, the hard-to-distinguish ferns, and even the bemoaned bittercress, are (still) subtly enriching the world.

Take a hint from the poet: ‘I’ll see the flowers /and little things, ridiculous things, shall move me / to smiles or tears or verse.’ 🌸

Martin Spray shares a garden in the Forest of Dean with his wife, who would like to see a lot more proper flowers in it and fewer ever-brown New Zealand sedges. Martin is an editor of *Ecos*, *A review of conservation*, and used to teach environmental ethics.

The leaves are from ivies climbing eleven adjacent pines in The Delves Inclosure, Brierley, in the Forest of Dean – true ‘biodiversity’

⁷ I wouldn’t dare to offer a name. One of my long-ago tutors, Mike Harvey, wrote that only ten *Mentha* species are recognised in Europe, ‘but in the *Index Kewensis* the names of over 900 species and hybrids are listed, chiefly from Europe. The majority of these are worthless, but it would be a life’s work to reduce them to order.’

⁸ George Ordish *The living garden*, London, 1985.