

In the front line

Judy Harry

Plants that grow in the front line perform many functions. They have to provide the first line of defence against careless invasions by mowers, feet, even livestock (fig. 1) They form at one and the same time the start and the finish of the border, leading the eye to statuesque and imposing plants at the rear, or allowing the eye to come to a comfortable stop at the front. Which all sounds rather prosaic, not to say functional. One of the pleasures of last year's gardening for me was being able to see some of my 'front liners' with fresh eyes, not just as the useful plants they undoubtedly are, but also as the star performers they can be in their own right.

It all started with the flowering of *Jovellana violacea* (fig. 2). Having bought it as a very small plant on the 2002 Autumn Weekend, I planted it where I could keep an eye on it. Each spring, in my ignorance, I cut it back to tidy it up, assuming that it would produce flowers later in the summer: exactly the wrong thing to do. This interesting little shrublet flowers on the previous year's wood in early summer, and with time will form a thicket of upright stems, bearing pale, whitish-mauve pouted flowers with spotted throats. My poor plant, of course, never had mature enough stems to produce so much as a spot, let alone whole pouches. How did I eventually realise my mistake? By reading, much more carefully, one of my favourite books.



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Fig 1 Plants at the front have to provide the first line of defence against careless invasions by mowers, feet, even livestock

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Fig 2 The pale violet pouches of *Jovellana violacea* were worth waiting for.

I know that I will fall asleep having learned something really useful. But I had failed to absorb the fact that *J. violacea* is semi-shrubby, and therefore not the herbaceous perennial I had forced it to be. Last year, better informed, and therefore better able to resist the temptation to tidy it up in the spring, I was rewarded with lots of neat little pouches at last. This *Jovellana* comes from Chile, and is not the hardiest of plant, so I was concerned that the severe winter might do some terminal pruning. It was of course frost-pruned, but has responded by sending up plenty of new stems.

I am not sure if it was a cold winter or some other difficulty that led to *Salvia multicaulis* (fig. 4) being so short-lived with me. I had selected a favoured warm



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Fig 3 His book is favourite bedtime reading for me.

and well-drained spot for this 'unusual and beautiful small species' (Jack Elliott again) and loved its crinkled sage-like leaves and disproportionately large calyces. Last year, having been sensitised to the virtues of low-growing plants, I particularly regretted its passing. I have grown other low-growing salvias, and for many years a form of *S. microphylla* (I'm not sure of its precise identity) has featured in both border and containers, as it is so easy to propagate from cuttings. Last year it excelled in the border, carrying multitudes of flowers until late into the autumn. There are many of these low shrubby salvias available (fig. 5), so we are spoilt for choice. In 2004, Webbs of Wychbold planted

¹ *The Smaller Perennials*, Jack Elliott, Batsford 1997: ISBN 0 7134 7799 7

up a border of salvias of all sorts in their demonstration garden, which gave a wonderful opportunity for comparing different varieties side by side. A return visit five years later demonstrated which were the toughest and most persistent ones but again I feared the bitter weather.

In the same family are the various forms of *Lamium* and it is stating the obvious to point out how useful they can be as front-line plants – and how dangerous with their territorial ambitions. Many years ago, I saw for the one and only time an impressive patch of what looked to be the relatively safe *Lamium garganicum* subsp. *garganicum*. I made a note that I should try and get hold of it for my garden having found that, frustratingly, it was not for sale in the accompanying nursery. For some reason, I never got round to tracking it down, and then ‘my favourite book’ sowed a seed of doubt in my mind: ‘the best forms are excellent with large flowers carried above the foliage, but it can be over-leafy with poor flowers’. I had obviously seen one of the best forms: could I be sure of obtaining one as good from somewhere else? Needless to say, I still don’t have it in the garden. What I do have is a wild flower which has wormed itself into my heart, in spite of its common name of Bastard Balm. *Melittis melissophyllum* (fig. 6) might also be accused of being over-leafy but the flowers are of a good size and substance with a vaguely orchid-like appeal and Jack Elliott includes it in his book with the recommendation that it is good for the front of the border or woodland. He also explains that it can be propagated by division or cuttings of the young shoots, which is good to know since the plant clumps up only slowly and rarely seems to self-sow. The lower 2009/2010 temperatures produce a triumphant exception to this rule – a forest of self-sown seedlings for the first time.

Both these plants, although low-growing, are by no means flat-carpeters which



Fig 4 The flowers of *Salvia multicaulis* give way to enormous showy calyces.



Fig 5 *Salvia microphylla* ‘Wild Watermelon’ was just one of many on show in a demonstration garden.

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Fig 6 Definitely worth finding a place for, is this modest plant *Melittis melissophyllum*.

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Fig 7 Aptly named, the small soft leaves of *Stachys byzantina* 'Silky Fleece' are studded with a forest of flower stems.

is important to me. For years I have advocated the inclusion of tall plants in borders, not just for reasons of scale but for the strong vertical accents which they bring. This is important too with the plants in the front line. If they merely spread horizontally, they are all too reminiscent of something that has been spilled, requiring speedy remedial action to stop it going too far. (Milk spreading relentlessly away from the fridge comes to mind.) If, however, a predominantly spreading plant produces vertical stems, this disturbing tendency is much less pronounced. It always surprises me that the flower stems of *Stachys byzantina* are

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Fig 8 A generous drift of *Plantago major rubrifolia* at Goltho Gardens made a dramatic feature.

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Fig 9 The carpeting form of aubretia makes a striking foil for lily-flowered *Tulipa* 'Maytime'.

spoken of so scathingly: I welcome this bold vertical feature on what is otherwise a felt carpet. So I was particularly pleased to find a plant of *S. b.* 'Silky Fleece' in a Norfolk nursery (fig. 7). Introduced in 2006 by Jelitto Seeds, it is a diminutive version of its big cousin, with small silky leaves and in due course a forest of short stems bearing rounded heads of plum coloured flowers. I am growing it in almost pure sand, which bothers it not at all, and last summer it looked good for weeks on end. Yes, it does spread, but is easy to remove once it has gone beyond its allotted space. It is perhaps as well to remind ourselves that repeatedly removing outer, more expeditious growths and leaving the older central portion will eventually weaken any plant. Replanting some of the new pieces will be essential before too long.

There are many plants that satisfy this demand for both horizontal and vertical interest, and I remember seeing a patch of *Plantago major* 'Rubrifolia' (fig. 8) demonstrating the point with dramatic force. Many hostas do the same, as do the bugles, with their upright flower stems.

One way that vertical stems can be guaranteed is by planting something appropriate beneath a horizontal carpeter like common aubretia, for example. Christopher Lloyd in *The Well-Chosen Garden*² (another favourite) points out that 'those who confine their aubretias to smug little blobs on rockeries... have no idea what a jolly plant it can be when given its head and allowed to think up a few ideas for itself.' In this case he is particularly advocating the way it will climb into other nearby plants, and although I do allow it to 'think up' such ideas, I also use it in a more controlled way with tulips (fig. 9). I also use a favourite hardy geranium with bulbs.



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Fig 10 A very pretty form of a common plant, *Geranium macrorrhizum* 'Snow Sprite' offers a supporting quilt for *Allium cristophii*.



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Fig 11 This geranium holds the top-heavy stems of *Allium cristophii* tidily upright.

² My edition of *The Well-Chosen Garden* by Christopher Lloyd was published in 1985 by Mermaid Books



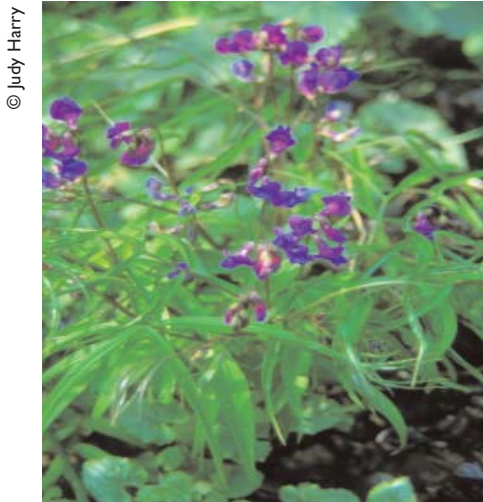
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Fig 12 When working close to a perky little plant, you come to really appreciate it.

Geranium macrorrhizum 'Snow Sprite' (fig. 10) is a pretty plant with pungently scented foliage characteristic of its species, but none of the reddish colouring, remaining a fresh green throughout the summer and autumn, and its pure white flowers seem to have a longer season than most. The plant makes more of a quilt than a carpet, which helps to hold the top-heavy stems of *Allium cristophii* tidily upright (fig. 11) long after they have dried out, and given up holding on to their patch of ground. Dramatic effects can be achieved by selecting plants with strong foliage interest as a background for dominant flowers: I have in mind a beautiful pairing of silky silver

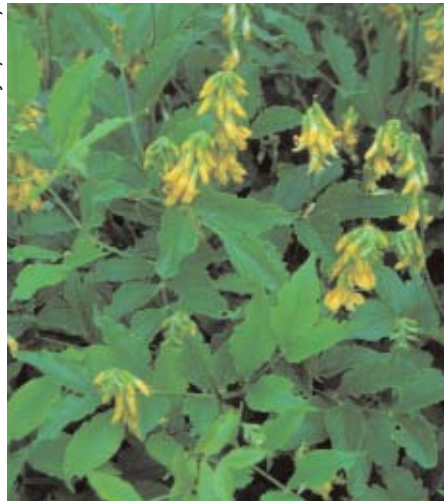
Artemisia with *Tulipa* 'Artist' seen one spring at Cranborne Manor in Dorset.

Using front liners this way gives maximum opportunity for contrasting forms of foliage, and grasses and sedges cannot be overlooked in this context. One part of our garden has, perhaps unfairly, come to be known as 'Tesco's', as the planting is much more obviously 'landscaped' in an attempt to reduce work. Here I have put groups of various low-growing *Carex* with bergenias and *Santolina rosmarinifolia* for contrast. The fountains of the three varieties of sedge in shades



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Fig 13 The elegant narrow foliage of *Lathyrus vernus* 'Flaccidus' sets off the jewel-like flowers to perfection.



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Fig 14 The unusual colouring of the later flowering *Lathyrus aureus* is not always easy to place.

of bronze and green sit very comfortably alongside bold and shiny bergenia leaves and the bright green, ferny foliage of the cotton lavender. Spring bulbs are planted in and around and I hope that they will increase over the years. The carex are cut back *en Brosse* in the spring to allow sun and air to get to the bulb flowers and to keep everything youthful.

Would that it were that easy with the gardener – as yet I have not seen renewal pruning of ageing gardeners being advocated. As a result, I find myself increasingly working on my knees, encased in really good knee pads to reduce the strain on back muscles. The bonus of this style of gardening, of course, is that the front liners really come into their own. When your nose is a couple of feet above some perky little plant, you really get to know it and appreciate it (fig. 12). Many come to mind. A generous gift of rarely encountered *Lactuca perennis* came as a revelation when its soft lavender-blue daisies on slender 30 cm. stems started to appear. In the same vein, I planted *Crepis incana* last year; it settled down with a will to produce its soft pink dandelion-like flowers in quantity alongside the subtle colouring of the not too tall *Sedum telephium* ‘Strawberries and Cream’.

In spring, I always welcome the appearance of the flowers on my various plants of *Lathyrus vernus*. A particular favourite is *L. v.* ‘Flaccidus’ (fig. 13) with its narrow foliage and rich purple flowers. (There are various forms of this around including one with even narrower leaves). As luck would have it, this is a perfect match for a neighbouring deep purple honesty which came with this garden thirty-eight years ago. A little later, I enjoy the unusual colouring of *L. aureus* (fig. 14), which used to have the genus *Orobus* to itself. Its flowers, orange with a hint of old gold, can be difficult to place, but I grow it in front of a soft



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Fig 15 Taking pity on a dying *Primula veris* ‘Katy McSparron’ was a good move.



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Fig 16 It was seeing *Saxifraga* ‘Miss Chambers’ (*x urbium*) in this Harrogate garden that convinced me of its quality.

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Fig 17 Finding an early spring flower on *Iris lazica* always gives me a boost.

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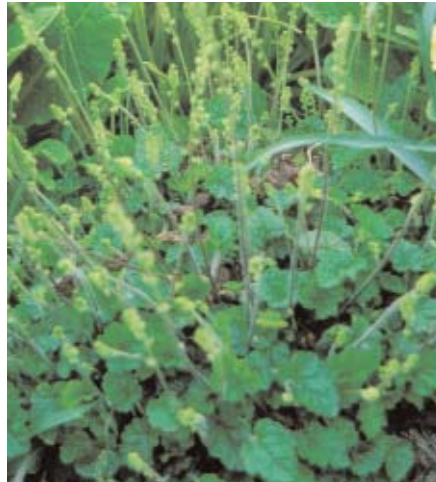


Fig 18 Seeing *Mitella breweri* with some polyanthus gives an idea of its scale.

silvery-mauve form of *Geranium pratense* which may or may not be *G. p.* var *pratense f. albiflorum* 'Silver Queen', and the effect is quite pleasing.

A front-liner that I had to rescue was a lovely, rich yellow, double flowered cowslip which goes by the name of *Primula veris* 'Katy McSparron' (fig. 15). It was on a trolley of half-dead, unwatered half-price plants which lurked at the back of a large garden centre, and out of 'philanthropy' I bought the least dead one for a pittance, and took it triumphantly home. With some TLC it revived, and eventually I planted it out. It grew, slowly, and flowered the next year but with little enthusiasm; which is when I remembered that in the wild cowslips like to be in full light. Since it was in quite a shady spot, more suited to its cousin the primrose, I lifted and divided the plant (dividing primulas must rank as one of the most satisfying of tasks), replanting in a more open situation at the front of the border. The result was amazing – flowers for weeks on end, right on into the summer. I recommend it, unless of course you dislike messed-about 'wild flowers' and double ones in particular.

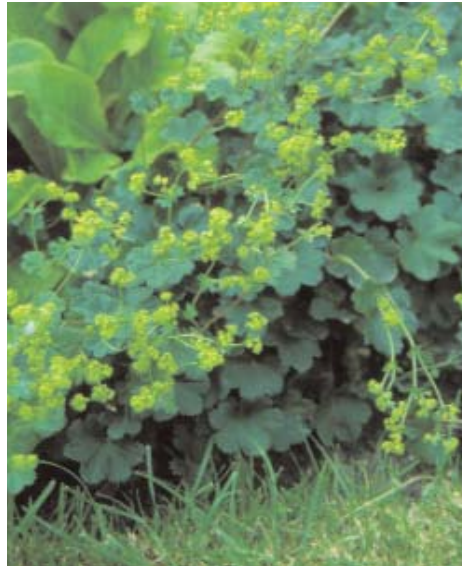
Many of these plants prefer to be in an open, even sunny, situation. But there are many lovely front-line plants that prefer shady conditions and since even shady borders have to start somewhere, it is as well to mention some that have become particular favourites over the years. When we came to this Victorian house and garden all those years ago, there was the inevitable patch of London Pride. I came to appreciate its many qualities, not least its willingness to grow in deep shade. Gradually I have become more discerning (picky?) and have come to

appreciate the better qualities of *Saxifraga* 'Miss Chambers' (fig. 16). This last year I also planted *S.* 'Clarence Elliott' whose performance I shall watch with interest; it is classed as a form of *S. umbrosa*.

Iris lazica (fig. 17), a shady-lady version of the better-known *I. unguicularis*, has settled down well. The broader foliage fans out, and in early spring from its heart emerge typically lovely mauve irises. The leaves make useful contrast in a shady and dampish front line, which also suits *Mitella*. In the rather serious world of plant naming it is fun to find a play on words, and this plant is in reality a smaller version of *Tellima*. *M. breweri* (fig. 18) is the most often encountered, and although Jack Elliott warns against its spreading tendencies it never made a nuisance of itself with me.

In fact it was in the end overwhelmed by other shade-lovers more able to tolerate our rather too dry conditions. I have better luck with pretty, spring-flowering *Cardamine enneaphylla*, whose creamy flowers stand above nicely fingered leaves. The whole thing sensibly disappears below ground by the time we get into the dryer summer weather, which I think accounts for its survival here.

Of the various smaller forms of Lady's Mantle, I particularly like shade-loving *Alchemilla erythropoda* (Fig. 19), which is to all intents and purposes a tiny version of *A. mollis*. In *The Smaller Perennials* ten species are listed, suited to a variety of situations. The last, *A. xanthochlora* (syn. *A. vulgaris*) is probably best left to grow in the wild as it is 'less effective, flower heads smaller, less yellow, leaves less hairy'. In other words, altogether less striking. It is this honest and vivid way of talking about plants that makes this book such a joy. With its help, I have come to see some of my plants in a new light and learned how to make a better job of growing them. 🐛



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Fig 19 *Alchemilla erythropoda* is to all intents and purposes a tiny version of *A. mollis* and very appealing for all that.

Judy Harry, a past Chairman of the HPS, continues to learn from her mistakes, albeit nearer the ground than before. Does the spectre of an alpine house hover somewhere in the future?