

President's perspective - plants, people and places

Roy Lancaster

What a difference a day makes. Following what to me has seemed like an eternity of dark, overcast skies and rain showers of monsoon intensity, today dawned bright and clear, if a little chill. Suddenly, all is well with the world, if only in my garden! Yes, I have had the usual enquiries from friends and colleagues as to how my plants fared in the recent (December) cold spell but today I look out on to a garden bathed in a golden glow and the optimist in me shouts 'Yes!' Whatever we might say or write about this or that plant brightening the dullest of winter days, there is no doubt that sunlight, no matter how brief, brings out the best in a garden at this time of year.

As I write this in late January, from my office I can admire the white-striped, jade-green stems of a maple, *Acer* 'White Tigress', gleaming crisp and clear against a blue sky. Nearby, in my neighbour's garden, the normally dull brown seed capsules lining the branches of a Carolina snowbell, *Halesia carolina*, have an extra quality, a positively warm glow, while evergreens of many kinds, conifers as well as broad-leaved shrubs and trees, show foliage of a richer hue or else shiny surfaces that gleam or flash as they reflect the light. In the shade, snowdrops are fast emerging while a few, including the curious double *Galanthus* 'Richard Ayres', and *G. elwesii* 'Maidwell L', are already in bloom, enough to provide early bouquets indoors.

This time last year we were under snow and there was not a single flower in sight to distract me from my daily task of clearing a path from our door to the gate and beyond. I did, however, enjoy the sudden warm camaraderie



Fig. 1 *Trachycarpus wagnerianus*.



Fig. 2 *Aspidistra papillata*.

taller growing Windmill palm, *T. fortunei*, with its drooping leaf tips. It is certainly more suitable for the smaller garden, and older plants produce exotic-looking golden inflorescences below the leaves in May.

One morning in March I was thrilled to find one of my Chinese *Aspidistra* species, *A. papillata* (fig. 2), producing three flower buds. Mine is a relatively young plant and I just hadn't expected it to perform so soon, but I was not complaining. Some days later, the first bud opened – a shallowly bell-shaped flower of a dark blackish-purple colour which contrasted strikingly with the large white 3-lobed stigma. The leaf blades are ovate-lanceolate, long-pointed and plain green with slightly glossy surfaces. I keep most of my small collection of aspidistras in a frost-free glasshouse over winter, bringing

them out for a summer holiday in cool shade when the weather perks up. I like to grow them in deep clay pots to accommodate their often long roots, and use a peat-free compost with a slow release fertilizer. Once fully established, I divide the dense clump for re-potting and, if I think I might get away with it, I try a plant or plants outside in a suitably sheltered, warm, shady corner.

One such, a clump of an attractive form of *Aspidistra sichuanensis* with long, strap-shaped, boldly gold-spotted leaves, I divided and planted in a narrow border below a hedge together with hardy ferns, epimediums and several coloured-leaved cultivars of *Acorus gramineus*. That was in 2009, and you will understand my pleasure when they survived the following winter and so far the present one. Only on the coldest nights, when the wind chill factor is significant, have I covered them with fleece.



Fig. 3 Ron Scamp with 'Cornish Chuckles'.

March also saw me in Cornwall, visiting Ron Scamp's bulb fields above Falmouth where he grows a huge selection of daffodils, many of his own breeding, for the bulb trade. One which particularly caught my eye was 'Cornish Chuckles' (fig. 3), originally of American origin, which he was growing in pots for garden centres. It is a dwarf hybrid with golden yellow scented blooms and in my opinion will give the ever-popular 'Tête-à-Tête' a run for its money. Another dwarf daffodil to catch my eye, this time at Sissinghurst Gardens on a bright cool morning on the last day of the month, was 'Jetfire', whose vivid yellow blooms sport a rich orange cylindrical trumpet.

In early April I was in Exmouth to give a lecture, hosted for the night by HPS Devon Group's Roger and Brenda Stuckey and their cats. It was a trip to remember, not least for their hospitality, while Roger's garden, front and back, was an Aladdin's cave of choice perennials, alpines and bulbs, most of which he has grown from seed. Notoriously generous, he insisted on my taking a selection of goodies in pots, including the charming diminutive *Dicentra cucullaria*, now in a trough on my patio, and true *Erodium pelargoniflorum* (as against *E. trifolium*) with its swollen base. I took several photographs in his garden including one of Roger working in what Brenda quipped was his second home (fig. 4), a tiny workshop/potting cubicle in a greenhouse.



Fig. 4 Roger Stuckey in "his second home".

I was reminded of this visit only yesterday, when one of the plants Roger gave me, *Petrocosmea begoniifolia*, a tiny rosette of rounded leaves, produced five minuscule three-lobed white flowers, each on a 5cm downy stalk. It is an exquisite little member of the *Gesneria* family from Asia. I am presently growing it beneath a bell jar under glass. It isn't hardy, but who cares?



Fig. 5 *Epimedium grandiflorum* f. *violaceum*.

Although I claim not to specialise in epimediums I do seem to have accumulated a fair selection, mainly thanks to my friend the Japanese botanist Mikinori Ogisu's Chinese introductions. I also grow several of my own



Figs. 6 & 7 *Abutilon* 'Master Michael' catches the eye, but my favourite is 'Red Tiger'.

introductions including *E. acuminatum*, *E. stellulatum* 'Wudang Star' and *E. pinnatum* subsp. *colchicum*. Then there is *E. grandiflorum* f. *violaceum* (fig. 5), which I introduced from Honshu, Japan, under my number L.2169 in 1998. Less spectacular in overall flower-power than some, it does make up for this in size of flower and elegance, dangling in clusters from slender stalks beneath the coppery-red young foliage in April.

Among the most satisfying and colourful plants in my garden last summer were a selection of pendulous bell-flowered abutilons given to me by friends. All were planted out in early summer and all flourished and flowered really well. In fact, many remain in the ground in the hope that some at least might survive over winter, but in case they don't, I take comfort in the young plants now under glass raised from cuttings rooted in late summer. Red-flowered 'Master Michael' (fig. 6) catches the eye, but my favourite is 'Red Tiger' (fig. 7), raised from cuttings given to me by plantswoman Nita-Jo Rountree of Seattle, USA, whose plant grown in a container looked sensational when I saw it in September 2009. Like the others, this cultivar is a sub-shrub up to 2m or more, but its smaller, bulbous, orange blooms with a striking network of red veins look for all the world like Chinese lanterns.

As always the Chelsea Flower

Show had much to offer the keen gardener, especially hardy planters. One perennial that attracted me in the Plant Pavilion was a dwarf version of *Epimedium* (yes, another) *dauidii* on Harvey's exhibit, its dainty leaves almost hidden by the masses of spurred yellow flowers. Waterside Nursery was showing a curious little cotton grass, *Eriophorum chamissonis* (syn. *russeolum*) (fig. 8), with terminally poised, silky tufted heads of golden hairs. It is native to the northern regions of North America where it grows in bogs and on lakesides. It was a little beauty, so I was pleasantly surprised later when my friend and fellow plantsman Matthew Biggs presented me with a plant. I grow it in a clay pot standing in a shallow dish which I keep topped up with rainwater. It is quite hardy.

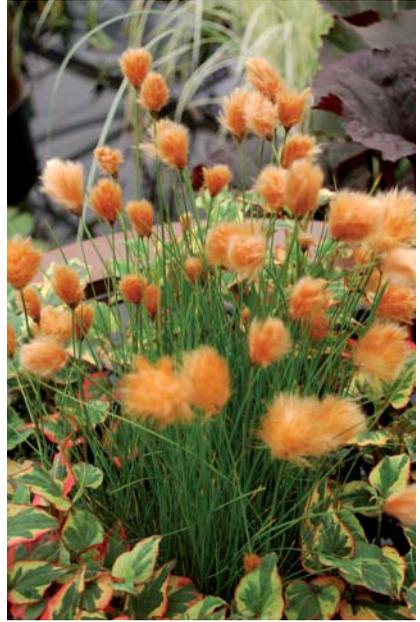


Fig. 8 *Eriophorum chamissonis* (syn. *russeolum*).

I can't leave Chelsea without congratulating the HPS West Yorkshire Group whose exhibit, *True Yorkshire Grit* (fig. 9), won a Silver



Fig. 9 The West Yorkshire Group's success at Chelsea.

Medal. I was even allowed to do a stint fielding questions about the plants in the display, which reminded me of the hard work and dedication required of HPS members in staging and staffing these exhibits. It was fun, though, meeting so many well-wishers who were full of praise both for the exhibit and our Society. Last year saw a host of medals awarded to HPS Groups – five Golds, two Silver Gilt and two Silvers; quite a haul, and very well done to all concerned.

Of course, high profile though they are, the flower shows are but one, albeit exciting, aspect of the Society’s many activities and attractions. A mere glance at the newsletters, both National and Group, should convince any gardener or plantlover that there is plenty on offer and so many opportunities to be involved with others of a like mind. Whether it is winter lectures or visiting members’ gardens or, as I did in June last year, popping in to your local Group’s plant sale, there is absolutely no reason to feel left out or forgotten. My local plant sale, by the way, saw me walking home with two bulging carrier bags of goodies, one of which, the true *Alchemilla alpina* (not the lookalike *A. conjuncta*) I had been searching for, for many years.

Another event I enjoyed last year was entitled, appropriately, *Passionate About*

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Fig. 10 There were occasional showers during the Autumn Weekend. Did it trouble us? Not a jot! Did we enjoy ourselves? You bet!

Plants. At this lecture day, superbly organised by the Middlesex Group, we were entertained by some excellent speakers and had the opportunity to buy yet more plants from a busy sales area. Congratulations Middlesex. As if this wasn't exciting enough, I also managed to join members for an Autumn Weekend organised by the Southern Counties Group in September. I arrived early in the morning at an impressive hotel in the Surrey countryside, to be welcomed by members who were replete and cheerful after a good breakfast just as they were boarding coaches for the day's garden visits. I was assigned to the 'Red' bus and immediately found myself among friends, some of whom



Fig. 11 *Eucomis comosa*.

I had met before and some I hadn't. They were a knowledgeable and jolly group and I don't think I stopped talking and listening all day.

All four gardens we visited were different and in their own ways special, and their owners could not have been more welcoming nor more helpful. The weather varied from overcast to sunny and there were occasional showers. Did it trouble us? Not a jot! Did we enjoy ourselves? You bet! I was also thankful to know that I wasn't the only garden visitor who appreciates the chance to sit down with a welcome cup of tea or coffee when pondering on or discussing the qualities of a garden and the plants it contains, especially with friends (fig. 10). As for the many great plants seen, I still dream about a bold clump of *Eucomis comosa* (fig. 11), its beautiful racemes of white flowers with dark ovaries, and a stunning specimen of *Hydrangea aspera* Villosa Group (front cover) laden with blue and mauve lace-cap flower heads which, despite the multi-coloured umbrellas sported by my fellow members, stood out a mile as a plant of real class.

It only remains now for me to wish all Hardy Planters an exciting, successful and enjoyable year wherever you may garden. Happy days! 🌿