

Some lessons learned

It seems that every year we look back on what the weather has thrown at us, and wonder at how our plants (or at least most of them) have survived.

The extreme winter of 2010/11 certainly brought into focus the effects of aspect and altitude, and the benefits of sheltered micro-climates; but notwithstanding often striking local variations, overall the regions have fared differently, and different lessons have been learned.

So here's a chance to profit from the experience of three Hardy Planters, without being subjected to the vagaries of their weather!

Hardy or what?

Roger Stuckey

These last two winters! They have certainly concentrated the mind on what is hardy. Of course, hardiness is not confined only to cold. There is hardiness from wet and hardiness from drought, both killers of plants in their own way. But to most gardeners, hardiness is thought of in terms of cold and frost. In the past two decades, I have been increasingly experimenting with plants of a more tender disposition, with varying degrees of success.

In Exmouth, which is fairly mild anyway (I am often accused of living in the banana belt), I have grown outside, without protection, plants which come from almost sub-tropical regions. In the past our frosts have seen a skim of ice on pails of water and a

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Fig. 1 *Rhodohypoxis baurii* 'Helen'

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Fig. 2 *Hedychium densiflorum* 'Assam Orange'

slight hardening of the surface of pots, mostly gone by midday. But this year we have had more frosts, they have been more severe, and they have hung around longer.

A good thing about frosts is that often seed germination, especially of alpiners, is enhanced; many harmful bugs are destroyed; and some shrubs actually flower better when exposed to a cold spell. A bad thing about frost is that it tends to kill those less-than-hardy plants we cherish. Some plants are still alive outside, although considered half hardy or tender. Some plants are cold-hardy but not wet-hardy. Others abhor the combination. It might be worth mentioning that plants in the open ground are more likely to survive than the same plant kept outside in a pot.

The silver-leafed *Santolina chamaecyparissus* subsp. *magonica*, supposedly a diploid form from Spain, has never looked back, although growing in a pot. It is now over 60cm across and has been bearing its yellow pom-pom flowers for several weeks as I write at the end of July.

Edgeworthia chrysantha comes from the Himalayan regions and is reputed to be hardy to -5°C . Mine was cut back but has sprouted new shoots. The fragrant yellow tubular flowers are borne in clusters. It should be grown by everyone, even if only in a conservatory.

I had a bit of a disaster with the leptospermums. *L. scoparium* ‘Red Damask’ shrubs 2.5m high and about 15 years old were killed, and even the dwarf *L. s.* (Nanum Group) ‘Kiwi’ and ‘Tui’ did not succeed, yet several *L. s.* ‘Nichollsii Nanum’, probably the smallest and slowest growing of the species, were fine both in troughs and in the open ground.

Another disaster was losing nearly every *Dierama*. Only one survived from my collection in pots, *D.* ‘Tiny Bells’, which I had sown the year before and kept in the greenhouse. This plant grows to about 60cm with lilac-pink flowers and is suitable where space is at a premium.



Fig. 3 *Dregea sinensis*

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Fig. 4 *Fremontodendron californicum*

© Janet Bryant/ HPS Photo Library

I also lost nearly all my collection of *Rhodohypoxis* (fig. 1) in pots, left outside but sheltered in the dry under a bench, yet those in troughs and the open ground are coming up happily, as they do every year. It bears out what I said earlier, plants will survive in the ground better than in pots when the weather is severe.

All my *Hedychium* in pots were lost, and yet *H. densiflorum* ‘Assam Orange’ (fig. 2) has proved hardy in the open garden for almost two decades.

A Chinese climber, *Dregea sinensis* (fig. 3), with its clusters of white, rose-centred flowers, superficially resembling those of *Hoya carnosa*, has seemed to enjoy the cold weather, although it is considered only half hardy, and has put up an excellent show against a fence, yet *Cestrum* ‘Newellii’ and *C. parqui*, planted beside it, did not survive.

Abutilon megapotamicum ‘Variegatum’ was cut back, but is growing with the protection of a tree and is a healthy metre high, but the larger-flowered *A.* ‘Canary Bird’, also planted outside, succumbed.

Fremontodendron californicum (fig. 4), from the SW of the USA, is considered half hardy, yet is 4m high in the garden and flowering well. As it’s supposedly difficult to grow from cuttings, seed is probably the best method of propagation, and it prefers a poorer rather than rich soil, which can encourage soft growth.

You would not think that African plants would survive our climate but it is surprising that so many do, particularly bulbs. I have grown *Amaryllis belladonna* and *Crinum x powellii* outside for over 30 years, and also *Nerine bowdenii*. *Eucomis comosa* ‘Sparkling Burgundy’ has proved to be equally hardy in the open ground. *Agapanthus africanus*, planted outside alongside the *Zantedeschia aethiopica*, have both flowered well, although they seem smaller clumps this year and I suspect may well have had some die-back. These Africans usually survive outside, as I think they probably do throughout the South of England.

You do not think of many greenhouse succulents as being hardy but two that did survive outside were *Echeveria runyonii* ‘Topsy Turvy’, and *E. secunda* var. *glauca*, although surprisingly the same plants in the unheated greenhouse were killed.

These are not the only plants on the slightly less-hardy side to survive in the garden over the last two winters, but to list them all would take too long.

So what have I learned from the last two winters? On the whole, growing in pots outside is not to be recommended in severe weather conditions, whereas sometimes the same plant in the open ground can pull through. Once a pot is thoroughly frozen solid, the roots are unlikely to survive. Suffice it to say that I did lose things in pots, protected dry in my unheated greenhouse, while the same plants persisted when planted in the open garden. Now who can explain that... 🐼

Roger Stuckey is particularly interested in testing the resilience of tender plants. Roger is Chairman of the Devon Group.

Alpines – an insurance against cold winters?

Barry McWilliam

After the third cold, snowy winter in succession in mid-Northumberland, and hearing much talk of plants lost to the severe weather, it is worth an audit of damage.

Here, after a very wet autumn, the cold weather began with a light fall of snow on 24th November followed next day by a more significant 10cm fall blanketing hedges, shrubs and branches overnight. Similar falls occurred daily/nightly with air frost and a complete snow cover, until a thaw on 10th December accompanied by light rain. For 6 days the temperature stayed just above freezing both day and night with an incomplete snow cover, but from the night of the 16th for 11 days the temperatures every night and most days were below freezing, and complete snow cover resumed on 19th December. Much of the late 2010 snow fell quietly in near-calm conditions and lay for long periods on bare branches and evergreens. The slow thaw, over what the Met. Office began to refer to as “the snowfields of Northern England”, began at the end of December and continued into January 2011, often with night frosts, but until the 15th never completely removing the snow/ice cover. In all there were 28 days of continuous snow cover and 33 nights of air frost before the end of January, several of them below -10°C .

Initially the weather damage looked severe. The heavy snow, close to 1m at its thickest, lay for long periods, weighing down whole shrubs and individual branches. Much dead

Five evergreen alpine *Penstemon* shrubs from the Western Cordilleras of the US.



Fig. 1 *Penstemon attenuatus* with forget-me-not-blue flowers spread along 30cm long stems, in the manner of the bigger herbaceous species.



Fig. 2 *P. aridus*, no more than 10cm tall, 30cm across.

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Fig. 3 *P. fruticosus* var. *scouleri* f. *albus*, the giant of the group, a low shrub 1m across.



Fig. 4 *P. newberryi*, a shrub up to 15cm high and 60cm across.



Fig. 5 *P. virens*, true deep-blue flowers on 15cm stems above a mat of shiny leaves.

material in tall trees fell from high, but also some live branches of substantial diameter were broken by the weight and had to be removed from both oaks and ashes. Some fastigate conifers were significantly less damaged, but some shrubs were positively flattened and emerged shattered. *Choisya ternata* Sundance, *Salix lanata* and even *Cornus alba* ‘Sibirica’ were so damaged that they had to be reduced to stumps, and are now regrowing. The one total loss was *Bupleurum fruticosum*, which had survived about ten North East winters, despite experts’ doubts as to its hardiness. Crowding by a neighbouring rhododendron may have contributed to its demise.

There seem to be no casualties among the herbaceous borders; indeed the warmth of March and April brought them to an advanced stage by May, though they then suffered from drought before our cold, wet, northern ‘summer’. Alpines too have survived unharmed, as one would expect. They may be the answer...

Stop Press: This was written in early June. In early August, when I set about removing the dead top growth of the *Bupleurum fruticosum* there was new growth at its base. Perhaps the rhododendron protected rather than killed it. Unfortunately it is very late in the season for a dubiously hardy plant to start into growth, making it unlikely that its growth will be woody enough to survive the coming winter, even if mild. 🌱

Predictably, other alpinists from around the world were unaffected by the winter.



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Fig. 6 *Incarvillea delavayi* (China), an exotic-looking member of the mainly tropical *Bignoniaceae*, is safely underground for the winter and, given good drainage, is completely hardy. It suffered more from a gale in late May than from the earlier extreme cold.



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Fig. 7 Alpines including white *Paradisea liliastrum*, St. Bruno's Lily, and blue *Globularia nudicaulis* (Europe); purple *Aster asteroides* (Asia) behind and the minute *Sorbus poteriifolia* (Upper Burma) at its foot.

Fig. 8 A mat of the pink-veined form of *Parahebe lyallii* (New Zealand), a group of *Anthericum ramosum*, St. Bernard's Lily (Europe), behind, and a small clump of *Erigeron glaucus* (North America) in the wall on the right. The leaves intruding on the left are *Nerine bowdenii* (South Africa).



© Barry McWilliam

Barry McWilliam was hooked on growing from seed as a teenager, ordering from his father's catalogues. Always gardening and growing from seed, he retired to be a full-time gardener. Most seed is obtained from society seed exchanges, with occasional forays into commercial wild-collected sources. Experience has taught that all hardy plants, including those in the photographs, germinate best without heat outside.

There's always something!

Andrew Lawes

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Fig. 1 Despite two harsh winters, a very dry spring, then deluges of rain, *Allium schubertii* is thriving

in Suffolk, I have followed ‘the teachings of Eddy’, and whenever the weather seems to be against us I have looked for the plants that have found the conditions to their advantage. It is surprising how some can survive or even flourish in adverse conditions, and in many instances I have been amazed. My biggest surprise came last spring when

In my early twenties we lived in a village on the Suffolk coast and, living in a village, one got to know people quite quickly. I remember in particular an old boy named Eddy, who had two passions in life – sea fishing and gardening. Daily we would meet at our allotments and, sure as eggs are eggs, one plant or another would have been damaged – pests on individual plants, or the elements had affected a whole species. Whatever the catastrophe, Eddy would proclaim “There’s always something!!!” and repeat it twice. An old sea dog as well as a seasoned gardener, his pragmatism would soon come into play, and changing tone he would follow with the observation that no matter what the season threw at us, some plant would thrive where others had died.

For more years than I care to admit, and still I dug up a dead sugar cane and put it, roots up, on the pile ready to burn. Two weeks later I noticed some growth which I thought was in a small part of the clump – investigation showed that it was the entire clump! So it survived not only cold but desiccation too, neither found in its tropical homeland.

East Anglia is generally one of the driest regions of the country, and I have planted accordingly. This year we had an unusually cold winter followed by a warm, dry spring and then frequent spells of torrential rain. This topsy-turvy

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Fig. 2 Frothy *Artemisia alba* ‘Canescens’ seemed to appreciate the early warm dry spell.

weather has given me the opportunity to see which of my plants are good survivors.

Noticeably through each season some plants did extremely well. *Allium schubertii* (fig. 1), in its third year, put on a wonderful show, its heads seeming even bigger. *A. hollandicum* ‘Purple Sensation’ in a friend’s garden also did well. Her *Ribes speciosum* was looking its best ever, the vivid red flowers dangling along each stem in such profusion it reminded me of the tasselled frills of a Victorian table cover.

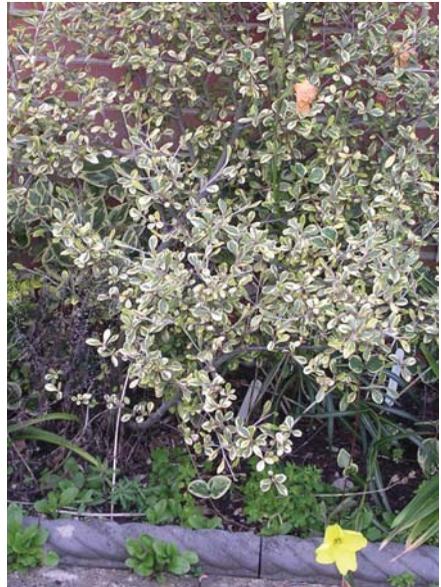


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Fig. 3 Heucheras have done well whatever the conditions and provided constant colour through winter cold, spring drought and summer rains.

Artemisias always look unsightly through the winter months, but I rein myself in and resist giving them a trim until new growth is well on its way in the spring. My favourite, *Artemisia alba* ‘Canescens’ (fig. 2), has done especially well this year.

A few years ago my wife and I started a modest collection of heucheras (fig. 3), and we’ve been very impressed by how tough they are. They ride out all the weather and provide colour for twelve months of the year. I’ve lost only one this last winter. Interestingly, on a visit to Aberglasney gardens this May, I saw their extensive heuchera beds had been devastated by the winter conditions so I got off lightly.



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Fig. 4 *Corokia x virgata* ‘Sunsplash’ enjoyed the early warmth.

Bob Brown¹ makes reference to not noticing a plant you have probably walked past many times and taken for granted; then, suddenly, it catches your eye. Well *Corokia x virgata* ‘Sunsplash’ (fig. 4) is one such. It really enjoyed the early warmth and produced masses of tiny, perfumed, yellow daisy-like flowers – small but perfectly formed and quite enchanting!

¹Some Good New Plants, Vol. 32 No. 1 Spring 2011.



Fig. 5 Galtonias look good in the mixed border



Fig. 6 *Dierama* not only survived its autumn move but flowered too.

Normally the very dry summers wreak havoc with our one hydrangea. It's for this reason I haven't got more of them: normally by August its flowerheads would have shrivelled no matter how much water I'd thrown at it. This is the best it has been in the four years we have been here. Similarly our *Galtonia candicans* (fig. 5) have not only overwintered in the border but are handsome specimens compared to the rather tired-looking individuals in 'normal', drier summers.

Plants I moved in the autumn have responded in different ways to the weather. My beautiful *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Giraffe' and *M. s.* 'Gold Bar' obviously didn't get their roots established enough early in the year and were held back by the dry spell, their leaves shrivelling and wizened. The phormiums were hit hard by the severe cold for a second time and in August are at last showing signs of recovery. I had split our dierama (fig. 6) and moved them, and after the sub-zero temperatures thought them lost, the leaves a dirty-grey colour for months. Then there were signs of life on two of the clumps and I was thrilled when flower spikes were produced.

There were numerous casualties with the potted plants and, like many Hardy Planters, I guess, I waited patiently for any slight sign of growth. Eventually patience ran out, and investigation revealed a soggy mess where the dormant root mass had previously been. All my pots of eucomis went this way, but the one planted in my rockery survived and flowered in its new micro-climate. All of which goes to show that no matter what the weather throws at us, in the plant world 'there's always something' that appreciates what that 'certain something' is! 🍷

Andrew Lawes edits the Norfolk and Suffolk Group newsletter and has gardened in both counties at one time or another for most of his life.