

The learning curve

Val Bourne

© Val Bourne



Fig. 1 Nine Acre Hill.

Gardens are windows into the soul. The pin-neat garden, the creative swirl and the voguish pink roses and box (the latter so oft repeated) say something about us – especially to others. And I fear most of us make the same sort of garden wherever we go. We draw in inspiration without realising it, but I've always assumed mine came from visiting better gardens than my own, somehow it drip fed into my brain through horticultural osmosis and came out at my fingertips. I assumed my trips to Kyoto must have rubbed off, along with the many books (and there has been a glut lately) about Italian gardens, or

those of Provence. Surely they must have been an influence, just like my regular fortnightly trips to RHS Wisley. My subconscious must be sucking it all up somehow.

But I had a shock one July evening. I drove up our local lane on a soft summer's evening in July to the thrill of dusky purple hardheads (Common Knapweed or *Centaurea nigra*) seen against sharp-lemon Ladies' Bedstraw (*Galium verum*) (fig. 1). The Ladies' Bedstraw forms a floppy froth of luminous yellow and this low cloud lights up the diamond-patterned buds and moody flowers of the hardheads behind, a combination that shrieks high summer.

As I pulled into my gate I realised that I was reproducing exactly the same colour combination and textures at Spring Cottage, quite unintentionally. I had obviously been getting inspiration from the rural landscape a short walk away: it appears that the green moss of Kyoto hadn't got a look in.

My clean-yellow garden plant, every bit as luminous as Ladies' Bedstraw, came in the shape of *Anthemis tinctoria* 'E.C. Buxton' – surely the finest summer daisy of all. Discovered in E. C. Buxton's garden in Betws-y-Coed before the First World War, at a time when yellow anthemis bore strong-gold flowers, it was named and popularised by neighbour and friend A. T. Johnson of *Geranium* 'Johnson's Blue' fame, and was almost certainly a spontaneous garden seedling. This hundred-year-old plant is still my ultimate anthemis, despite more recent arrivals like 'Sauce Hollandaise'. It radiates light like no

other and the daisies are larger than most and they swoon so effectively at dawn and dusk by dropping their petals to half mast. I always puzzle how such a sun-loving plant thrived under the rain-filled skies of North Wales – nine times out of ten whenever I passed that way (fetching and carrying my daughter Fran from Bangor University) it was raining.

Reinforcing the yellow of the anthemis, close by are the large saucers of an upright lemon oenothera, or evening primrose, from John Hoyland's Pioneer Plants. I've never known the name or seen it anywhere else. Its two-inch saucers, born on long tubes, twist up after a day to soft apricot. It's sterile, so this fading beauty has to be raised from cuttings, although my original plant has survived freezing winters, something Cold Aston majors in.

The dusky reds and purples reminiscent of the hardheads are provided by *Penstemon* 'Andenken an Friedrich Hahn' (syn. 'Garnet'), the purple-tailed *Teucrium hircanicum*, the dark buds of *Origanum laevigatum* 'Herrenhausen' and the drumstick bobbles of *Allium sphaerocephalon*. They persist throughout summer into autumn, inky flashes of colour.

The fading evening light also picked up the hint of yellow flowers on a lovely silver-leaved plant with filigree foliage – *Artemisia absinthium* 'Lambrook Mist' (and not 'Lambrook Silver' – I had both, but lost one). 'Lambrook Mist' was named by Andrew Norton, who owned Margery Fish's Somerset garden in the 1990s. It has less divided foliage than 'Lambrook Silver' and it's easier to keep. Take cuttings of both in July. The floppy spike of silver-white buds, showing a merest hint of yellow, shared the same frothy texture of the bedstraw. The stems had placed themselves among an excellent red achillea called 'Summerwine'. Nearby, another achillea, *A. millefolium* 'Red Velvet', seems to look exactly the same. It was apparently selected from 'Summerwine' as better. In the dusk this combination is stunning.

A chilleas add structure to my chaotic swirl with their level-headed flowers and strong stems. I use plenty up the drive, but the wild form of *A. millefolium*, or yarrow, is a great nuisance here. I have to allow it to flower before I can pull it out with certainty. Otherwise I might pull out 'Martina' and then I would miss her green-tinted yellow flowers that appear in such profusion in June, although I do wish she were stiffer stemmed. Ernst Pagel's 'Walther Funcke', a marmalade-orange achillea with a paler eye, endures here from year to year and is one of the finest for keeping its colour.



Fig. 2 A satisfying though accidental combination of echinaceas, *Pennisetum orientale* 'Karley Rose' and *Selinum wallichianum*.



Fig. 3 Also by happy chance, wind-blown giant fennel deepens the red of crocosmia.

flowering hardy-for-me grass, with very minimalist pink-flecked caterpillars, flowers in summer here despite my cold position. Behind, the purple-sheathed stems of *Selinum wallichianum* mimic a purple monarda called ‘Violet Queen’. Monardas, listed as three feet high, top five feet here with the spring below them.

Of course colour is such a personal perception. Many years ago a friend bought a new silver-pink evening gown for a prestigious event. Keen to show her husband, she was somewhat taken aback when he described it as battleship-grey, with all the implications of that description. Men seem to see a different spectrum. We think silver-pink, they veer off to gun-metal grey. Colours I admire as lavender and mauve in the RHS Wisley lobelia trial are relegated to grey by my male colleagues, with much jollity on their side!

My other accidental placing is the giant fennel (*Ferula communis*) which is flowering brilliantly and was topping seven feet. It should be posing in front of the purple-blue clematis ‘Etoile Violette’, but a strong wind has blown it into a clump of deep-red crocosmia and there it lies, looking so much better, deepening the clear red (fig. 3). I like it almost as much as the tall single French marigold I grow (from self-collected seed) and the same sharp lime green, this time from an annual called *Bupleurum griffithii* ‘Decor’. How I wish I’d had the nous to plant a purple-flowered climbing bean behind them, like ‘Blauhilde’. Instead I have the creamy hybrid runner x French ‘Moonlight’.

The bupleurum, selinum and ferula are all umbellifers, members of the cow-parsley family, and these are trendy plants. Or are they? I think I’m planting at the cutting edge, but I’m probably mimicking another verge close to the village. So although I visit Hidcote Manor, Great Dixter and the revamped Pensthorpe, the inspiration for my garden appears to be much closer than I think. 🐛