

# In the pink with orange

**Lesley Kant Cunneen**

‘When I am .. old .. I shall wear purple with a red hat’

So runs Jenny Joseph’s poem, which has become a mantra for women of a certain age. I think this must be the stage I have reached horticulturally: but alongside the purples and reds in my garden are liberal injections of orange.

When I started to garden, over thirty years ago, I was consumed by notions of good taste: pastels and white, single flowers, a taboo on the strident. Pretty, yes, but anodyne. I finally gained the confidence to use stronger shades, but they were carefully placed to heighten the predominant colour scheme or used in colour-coded borders. In common with many gardeners seduced by Sissinghurst (Vita has so much to answer for), I created the ubiquitous white garden. As with other gardening disciples I made my pilgrimage to the colour-themed gardens at Hadspen, created by the Canadian partnership of Nori and Sandra Pope, and attempted to emulate their beds of blue and borders of claret and a sun-lit sunken garden of buttercup yellow. It was admired, but it was also safe, and I suspect it lacked joie de vivre.

Our need to downsize resulted in our present city plot and a terribly tiny garden.



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Fig. 1 Giverny

Prior to removal I spent more time contemplating the prospective garden than the house, and toyed with ideas of green minimalism – lots of box-lined beds embracing topiaried shrubs and underplanted with judiciously selected bulbs. Although I still occasionally yearn for the clipped garden created by Nicole de Vesian in Provence, self-knowledge surfaced: inevitably, spontaneous plant purchases would sabotage the discipline needed for such a garden.

Claret and chrome were to be the basis of the colour scheme in my new sundial garden: this enabled copious use of *Euphorbia*, one of the best structural perennials, burgundy and green tulips, alliums and sanguisorbas, dahlias and lime *Nicotiana*. It worked well for a couple of years, but I tired of the self-imposed restriction. And a colour that I had rarely used before insinuated itself into the garden, almost by accident. Orange. In fact the takeover started with the common nasturtium: the garden is walled, and in the early years I craved instant cover before the wall shrubs and climbers took hold. Anyone who has visited Giverny (fig. 1) will be a fan of rampant nasturtiums: they are able to weave themselves into the most eye-catching position, and the hotter the terracotta the better. Nasturtiums proved an easy solution for the bare Norfolk brick red walls. Admittedly they went through a brief period of blackfly aphid, but with more pressing problems of workmen in the house I was able to ignore them and within three weeks the hoverflies and ladybird larvae had resolved the blight and lifted my spirits. Over the years I have tested differing cultivars and decided that *Tropaeolum peltophorum* ‘Spitfire’ works particularly well; it reaches skyward, is undaunted as it circumnavigates other plants, and its cheerful tangerine flowers are never intrusive. After the *Trachelospermum jasminoides* has finished flowering in midsummer, *T. p.* ‘Spitfire’ twines amongst the glossy green leaves until the first frosts (fig. 2).

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Fig. 2 *Tropaeolum peltophorum* ‘Spitfire’ twines around the foliage of *Trachelospermum jasminoides*

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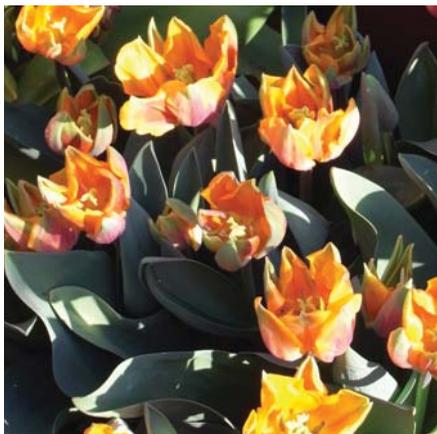


Fig. 3 *Tulipa* ‘Prinses Irene’

I mentioned to Janet Sleep (a regular contributor to these pages) my new passion; she replied politely that orange needed careful placing. I am sure she is right: her Gissing garden always looks exquisite and I cannot recall orange in any shape or form. But despite her advice I am now scattering oranges with abandon.

Of course orange covers a wide colour spectrum ranging from tawny russets via rich umbers through to sharp nasturtium. My orange-fest begins early in the gardening year with dwarf and species tulips: *Tulipa* ‘Little Princess’ arrives in April and glows rich copper in the sun. It is followed by *T. linifolia* Batalinii Group ‘Bronze Charm’, the colour of ripe apricots, accompanied by my favourite, the species *T. whittallii*, a May-flowering AGM holder which is burnished copper streaked with tangerine. All these tiny tulips look better for being grown in terracotta pots and raised up so you can marvel at their miniature beauty. The triumph tulip, ‘Prinses Irene’ (fig. 3), is partnered in the borders by the burgundy ‘Jan Reus’. ‘Irene’ is exquisite and understandably used by Anna Pavord as the cover photograph in her excellent book *Bulb*, which gives some of the best planting advice available. It is the softest pumpkin orange, beautifully feathered on the outside with claret and the occasional green streak. It stands proud at 18 inches and if I could grow only one tulip it would be this.

*T. ‘Artist’* (terracotta and green) and *T. ‘Abu Hassan’* (rich mahogany edged with a gold band at petal tip) follow in May and herald the next orange bulb: *Ornithogalum dubium* (fig. 4), another AGM, which blooms in June. This is orange at its most unabashed – almost luminous – and the stem supports a number of flowerheads, although as with alliums the leaves die off as the flowers begin to emerge. It is half hardy so again I grow it in pots, but I have seen it flourishing elsewhere in a protected patch against a brick wall.



Fig. 4 *Ornithogalum dubium*



Fig. 5 *Lilium lancifolium* ‘Splendens’

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Bulbs play an important role in our minuscule garden, and the spotted tiger lily, *Lilium lancifolium* ‘Splendens’ (fig 5), has proved particularly successful despite the fact that it prefers an acid soil to my alkaline loam. (The brick-red Turk’s cap flowers with their distinctive spots are clustered around strong stems and make a handsome feature, but lily beetle is making me reconsider: the early sabotaging of crown imperials was the last straw.) The most striking orange lily I have seen is *Lilium* ‘Lily Allen’ (fig. 6); it was strutting its stuff on a plant stand at the Sandringham Show and its in-your-face attitude proved a great crowd pleaser. It may be a touch brazen, even for me, but in my friend’s garden it has been beautifully posed, as befits a pop star.

Many years ago on a visit to Great Dixter I remember seeing African marigolds in the long border. Christopher Lloyd was celebrated for his capacity to shock, but the plant seemed out of place – not because of its colour but because of the unremitting stiffness of its habit. I wondered at the time why he preferred it to the more naturalistic *Calendula officinalis*, another prosaic annual which I allow to self-seed and weed out if it becomes overly enthusiastic; or to *Tithonia rotundifolia* ‘Torch’ (fig. 7), which I grow annually from seed: the foliage is coarse but its branching and upright habit, cinnamon-orange daisy flowers, and capacity to bloom from June until the first frosts make it a winner. The easy-to-grow Californian poppy, *Eschscholzia californica*, with its ferny, glaucous foliage and simple quilled flowers, is remarkably accommodating; the other day a journalist recommended the white variety, *E. californica* ‘Alba’, but I have been trying to eliminate the yellows and whites from the type. Janet Sleep’s photo of the poppy in Keith Wiley’s brilliant Devon garden shows how effectively it can be used (fig. 8). And now I discover Chiltern Seeds stock a variety called *E. californica* ‘Mikado’ – orange with red revers, which is too tempting! Last year I spied a stunning russet

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Fig. 6 *Lilium* ‘Lily Allen’

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Fig. 7 *Tithonia rotundifolia* ‘Torch’

thunbergia (fig. 9) in Will Giles' Exotic Garden: twining through the cannas, palms and tree ferns, this ordinary garden annual appeared for the entire world like a jungle habitué. I came home and scrutinised my tangerine Black-Eyed Susan and declared it wanting.

I have been a dahlia fan for many years and initially restricted myself to the ubiquitous *Dahlia*



© Janet Sleep

Fig. 8 *Eschscholzia californica*

'Bishop of Llandaff'. Recently I have found the combination of apricot 'Catherine Deneuve' (fig. 10) and deep claret 'Bednall Beauty' a scrumptious combination. Also impressive was the combination of vivid orange 'Bishop of Oxford' with blowsy chocolate 'Rip City'; the combination of the dark burgundy with the Bishop's bronze foliage is particularly effective. Then, to my astonishment, the dahlias labelled as 'Soulman' turned out to be genetically unstable, possessing none of the expected plum, but orange laced with red, gold and burnished bronze and a mixture of single, double and treble flowers. As I had planted them in a pot I was able to keep a good eye on the interlopers: they proved to be vigorous, reaching five feet with ease, and wantonly floriferous. Although such plants are referred to as chimeras, after the mythological monster made up of various animals, I considered my electric-orange dahlias a bonus and hope to preserve them for future use.



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Fig. 9 *Thunbergia alata*

Ginger Lilies are my most recent acquisition, after spotting on a garden visit a luxuriant clump of *Hedychium densiflorum* 'Assam Orange' (fig. 11). It is a bronzed orange and very easy to incorporate into mixed planting. Last year I was on tenterhooks waiting to see if it had escaped the winter's onslaught and my dilatory mulching. And although it bloomed late, all three clumps survived, which suggests that gingers are much hardier than has been assumed.

Crocsmias are quintessential hardy plants and too often despised for their *Montbretia* origins. Like many gardeners I make use of *Crocsmia* ‘Lucifer’, but I

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Fig. 10 *Dahlia* ‘Catherine Deneuve’

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Fig. 11 *Hedychium densiflorum* ‘Assam Orange’

recently introduced two orange crocsmias: *C. x crocosmiiflora* ‘Emily McKenzie’, whose orange is accentuated by splashes of pillar-box red, and *C. x c.* ‘Carmin Brilliant’ – assuming it to be a short form of ‘Lucifer’ I discovered it was closer to orange, the flower a mix of yellow and orange with a flash of scarlet in the corolla so the overall effect is shimmering auburn. I combine it with grasses: I find *Deschampsia* works particularly well, the softness contrasting with the spiky leaves. I stubbornly resisted the carnival-coloured *Alstroemeria ligtu* hybrids for years in my search for more refined colours but now revel in its grace, reliability and willingness to flower through dusty August. Two desert-island perennials of choice must be the tawny *Euphorbia griffithii* ‘Dixter’ and *Papaver rupifragum* (fig.12). All poppies are desirable but this is a stunner: its frilled flowers continue throughout the summer and as long as you occasionally deadhead, the plants continue flowering with a beguiling simplicity. It sets seed with ease, often in paving cracks (its name means rock breaking), but it holds its tangerine flowers aloft on wiry stems so that you are captivated rather than irritated by its impudence.

Climbers are critical in a small city garden, providing much needed privacy. Garden designers advise restraint, preferring a green backcloth, which I have ignored. *Rosa* ‘Ghislaine de Féligonde’ is a compact rambler with amber flowers that are mango in bud, mutating to creamy yellow; as a bonus she performs obligingly on a north wall. I met her first on a visit to Peter Beales’ nursery, when she appeared at the bonnet of the car as I

parked. To my husband's surprise I was on my knees in a trice, scrabbling to find the label. She has repaid my efforts: floriferous and healthy. She also blends beautifully with local brick – always a difficult colour to clothe.

The carrot of *Campsis radicans* 'Madame Galen' (fig.13) also succeeds, though in hindsight a mistake: its vigour means an annual hacking job akin to the despoiling of the Amazon rain forest. However, a climber that is beautifully accommodating is *Eccremocarpus scaber*. The Chilean Glory Flower is always described as slightly tender, but I have grown it in my Norwich garden for six years without problems and the original plants are still in situ, continuing blithely throughout the winter. I acquired it from the HPS seed list, attracted by the term 'scandent' with its connotations of scrambling and twining. It has fine-feathered leaves, brittle stems and deep orange bellflowers with a contrasting lighter orange lip. It clings obligingly to its neighbours, for as the name implies it performs best if hosted by other plants: in my case a wall of mixed ivy and *Clematis cirrhosa* var. *purpurescens* 'Freckles'. I find greens and purples leaven this marmalade mix: the chrome and glaucous greens of euphorbia and sedum; the silver and magenta of *Lychnis coronaria*; and *Geranium* 'Ann Folkard' all combine to joyous effect. And because every garden needs a place of calm, you can move from a sunlit orange space into a courtyard garden, with tranquil shades of green.

Last year, on a gardening tour of Madrid, I made the acquaintance of a keen gardener. Initially I thought I had met a soulmate. I enquired how she gardened. "White" she replied, "I never use colour in the garden, only white flowers".

I feel sorry for her as I garden away in my red hat. 🧢



Fig. 12 *Papaver rupifragum*



Fig. 13 *Campsis radicans* 'Madame Galen'

**Lesley Kant Cunneen** crams far too many plants into her tiny city plot in Norwich. This year the garden is open under the NGS together with her two neighbours.