

President's perspective – plants, people and places

Roy Lancaster

One of the most memorable experiences of my garden year comes when stepping out of our front door on a winter's day or night to find my sense of smell reeling from the all-pervading fragrance of *Daphne bholua*. I have several different clones of this Himalayan shrub including 'Darjeeling', whose white, pink-flushed flowers start the "bholua season" in late October or November, and the darker-flowered 'Peter Smithers', which normally follows in December or January. My favourite, however, is 'Jacqueline Postill' (figs 1 & 2), whose strong upright growth, eventually to 3m, produces an abundance of bloom from December into February or even later. Most plants of 'Jacqueline Postill' available in garden centres today have been micro-propagated by tissue culture, which provides a plant on its own roots and one more likely to produce the suckering habit of plants growing naturally in the wild. It is 'Jacqueline Postill', the plant not the person, that I have planted in a narrow border opposite our front door, with a further two in our rear garden for good measure, and I am enjoying their flowers now from my window as I pen these lines on the last day of 2011.

As a gardener with a passion for writing, I find the few days following Christmas and before the dawn of the new year a blessing. If I am lucky, I can get two maybe three days in which to sit quietly reliving in my mind some highlights, and not just those of the past year. As it happens, 2011 was the 30th anniversary of my participation in the Sino-British Botanical Expedition to the Cangshan Mts of W. Yunnan, from which trip such exciting newcomers as *Paris polyphylla* var. *yunnanensis alba* (fig. 3), *Anemone trullifolia*, *Gentiana ternifolia*, *Pleione forrestii* (fig. 4), *Hypericum latisepalum*,



Fig. 1 *Daphne bholua* 'Jacqueline Postill'

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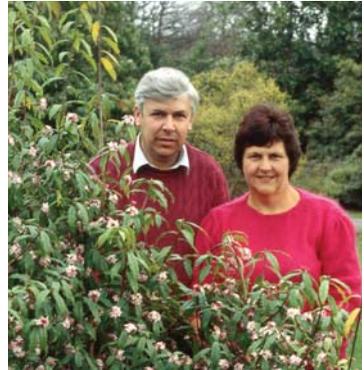


Fig. 2 Alan & Jacqueline Postill

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Fig. 3 *Paris polyphylla* var. *yunnanensis alba*

morning last summer. In it I discovered small plants of *Bergenia purpurascens* ‘Len Beer’, sent to me by Simon Bond of Thuja Alpine Nursery at Partbury in Gloucestershire. Two other Nepal collections named for Len are *Rhododendron glaucophyllum* ‘Len Beer’ and, more recently, *Betula utilis* ‘Len Beer’. The birch has yet to be propagated while the rhododendron is no longer on my radar, though hopefully someone out there grows it still.

February saw my sarcococcas in flower, and one in particular which I grew from seed (L.660) collected in the Western Hills above Kunming in Yunnan in 1980. It is a form of *S. ruscifolia* var. *chinensis*, distinctive in its more compact, erect growth and



Fig. 4 Shepherd girl with *Pleione forrestii*



Fig. 5 *Indigofera pendula*

Chrysosplenium davidianum, *Indigofera pendula* (fig. 5) and *Geranium yunnanense* (fig. 6), to name but a few, were introduced to British cultivation.

It was also the 40th anniversary of the University College Bangor Nepal Expedition of which I was a member (fig. 7). Happy memories indeed. I was reminded of the leader of this expedition, the late Len Beer, a dear friend and colleague, when opening a parcel delivered to me one



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Fig. 6 *Geranium yunnanense*



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Fig. 7 Nepal Expedition 1971.
From the left: Da Norbu, Len Beer and Roy

more distinctly in its narrower, slender-pointed leaves. It is free-flowering and richly fragrant and well deserving of a place in the garden. Given the close proximity of a well-known Buddhist temple to the collection location, I gave this distinct form the cultivar name ‘Dragon Gate’ (figs 8 & 9) and on a recent visit to John Massey’s garden at Ashwood Nurseries I was delighted to see it planted to great effect beneath a *Fatsia japonica* on his patio.

My passion for mahonias is well known to my friends in the gardening world, none of whom would have been surprised to hear me singing out loud on finding one of my latest acquisitions, *Mahonia gracilis* (fig. 10), flowering for the first time at the end of March. Having previously lost two small plants of this Mexican species to winter cold, I was overjoyed to be given,



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Fig. 8 *Sarcococca ruscifolia* var. *chinensis*
‘Dragon Gate’



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Fig. 9 Western hills above Kunming, home of
‘Dragon Gate’

by Mark Fillan from Devon, a 1m specimen which I planted on the north side of the house in a sheltered nook protected by a large *Aucuba omeiensis* and a *Grevillea victoriae*. To those more familiar with *M. aquifolium* or *M. japonica* and other more commonly grown species and hybrids, *M. gracilis* might come as a surprise with its smooth, slender, upright stems and shoots and its glossy, glabrous leaves. At first the leaves reminded me of a rare evergreen ash, a *Fraxinus* species, for they are soft to the touch and easily handled, and bear 7–11 slender-pointed, minutely toothed leaflets. I could hardly believe my luck that such a treasure, so recently installed, should reward me with several slender drooping racemes of fragrant two-tone daffodil-yellow flowers which continued to please for a week or more. My plant has continued to establish itself and is presently 2m tall with new flowers already developing.

On a sunny day in April I accompanied a local gardening friend on a visit to the late Amy Doncaster’s former garden to look for a plant of *Epimedium acuminatum* (figs 11 & 12) I gave her on my return from China in October 1980. The site had become increasingly overgrown following its sale for development and, although I had a good idea where the epimedium had been planted, our search proved unsuccessful, though other more robust and creeping epimediums survived. In some places, despite brambles and burgeoning evergreens, we found signs of former glories soldiering on, including drifts of the erythroniums for which this garden was once well known; but we realised that soon the plantsman’s garden we remembered from its heyday would become just a memory. Fortunately, most of Amy’s favourite plants, including her special snowdrops, had been shared with gardening friends during her lifetime. As for the *Epimedium acuminatum*, it was but one of several seedlings I had returned with and this collection L.575 is now well established in cultivation.

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Fig. 10 *Mahonia gracilis*

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Fig. 11 Amy Doncaster in her garden, with *Magnolia stellata* ‘Water Lily’

As Hardy Planters we are aware of and appreciate the importance of sharing and I have benefited so many times over the years from giving and receiving plants. Last year, for instance, I had cause to celebrate the gift of an unnamed Chinese *Begonia* when it produced beautiful apple-blossom-pink, cup-shaped flowers in clusters atop stout, fleshy, hairy stems. I had planted it in a sheltered site beneath a hardy palm, *Trachycarpus wagnerianus*, at the foot of a south-facing wall. It sprang into growth in May, producing large-lobed and toothy green leaves from beneath which the flowering stems appeared in October. As it happened, I had subsequently been given another plant under the name *Begonia emeiensis* with the promise that it was quite hardy in the donor's garden. I planted this one in the shade of a *Magnolia cylindrica* and hoped for the best. Although the two plants differed slightly in leaf shape, it was quite clear to me when it flowered that they belonged to the same species, the flowers being identical. Since then I have given leaves to several people including an old friend and former butcher who has the proverbial 'green fingers'. Not surprisingly he rooted them in his propagation frame and I just know his spares will be passed on to other friends. Though naturally the two products were kept and displayed separately, before he retired my friend used to offer propagated plants at his shop, where for a time customers could buy choice items such as *Eucomis zambesiaca* (fig. 13) and *Corydalis flexuosa* along with their beef and sausages! It proved a very popular service.

In common with most gardeners, May is probably my busiest period of the year, not least for its flower shows of which Chelsea is the largest and most important. It occurred to me that had it not been for my absence on an expedition to China in May 1981, last year's Show would have been my 50th. I now look forward to attending in 2012 to celebrate the anniversary. Having said that, Chelsea 2011 abounded with exciting plants, one of which, *Anemone* 'Wild Swan' (fig. 14), was voted the 'Chelsea Plant of the Year'. With its relatively low habit (less than 60cm) and its initially nodding, bowl-shaped



Fig. 12 *Epimedium acuminatum* L. 575



Fig. 13 *Eucomis zambesiaca*

white flowers flushed grey-blue on the exterior, this hardy, long-flowering perennial attracted much comment from visitors. I must confess to having a personal interest in this plant ever since I first saw it, unnamed, on its raiser Elizabeth MacGregor's exhibit at a Gardening Scotland Show in Edinburgh several years ago. I remember admiring it then and attempting to purchase a plant. Sadly, it was not for sale and I had to wait until this year to see it at last flowering in my garden, which it did for several months through the summer into autumn. I grow it in a clay soil in full sun though I believe it will also take light shade.

May also saw my annual visit with friends to Les Journees des Plantes de Courson (Courson Flower Show). We broke our journey to make a private visit to the late Princess Greta Sturdza's garden, Le Vasterival near Dieppe, which is still maintained by her family with advice from freelance writer Didier Willery. The Princess was, among other things, an avid collector and her garden is filled with plants old and new, as well as those better known (fig. 15). Among those I admired on the day was *Viburnum macrocephalum* f. *keteleeri* (fig. 16), a hardy shrub with spreading branches. This is the wild form of the better known garden plant generally sold as *V. macrocephalum*, which is normally seen trained against a warm wall for extra protection; introduced from China around 1844, it has large, globular, snowball-like heads of sterile white flowers and is quite spectacular when flowering in May. *V. m.* f. *keteleerii*, introduced some 16 years later, has much of the elegance of the better known *V. plicatum* f. *tomentosum*, spreading, though not strictly horizontal, in its branching and bearing dense, flattened flowerheads up to 10cm across, made up of

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Fig. 14 *Anemone* 'Wild Swan'

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Fig. 15 Princess Greta Sturdza in 2007, aged 93, with a *Weigela* seedling

creamy fertile florets ringed by large white sterile florets, creating a charming lace-cap effect. This wild variety is now rarely seen in British cultivation but it is hardier than the sterile plant and well worth searching for if you prefer class to mere wow factor.

Staying with new plants, I must tell you about *Cobaea pringlei* (fig. 17), which I count as my plant of the year in so far as my garden is concerned. It is by no means new to cultivation, but no other plant brought me such pleasure and excitement when its first flowers began to open in September. The slender-tubed, creamy-white trumpet, nodding to inclined on a long, fleshy peduncle (stalk), is so much more refined than the dumphy green or purple cup-shaped flower of the better known *C. scandens*, though if I had the space I would probably accommodate that too. I was given a small plant of *C. pringlei* in late summer 2010, and aware of its tender nature I planted it in a west-facing border by our front door, where the canopy above has created a dry zone of about 1 x 1.5m. beneath. Even with the overhead protection I took the precaution of covering the base of the seedling with garden fleece. And so it remained through the cold winter until spring when new growth began to emerge. For the next few months it was all action and anticipation as a bunch of slender leafy stems with coiled tendrils gradually swamped the face of the wall and travelled above the door to reach another wall where it then formed a lush curtain of stems and leaves.

The flowers, when they eventually appeared, were borne on the final quarter of the season's growth and, once started, continued to appear in a never-ending cascade. The effect was tremendous and I soon gave up counting the individual blooms. Foolishly, I began thinking of the wealth of seeds the fruits would deliver and the number of friends who would benefit. Sadly, for all its prodigious flowering, my plant formed just two unripened green pods while the empty green calyces of the remainder provided living proof that one must not count one's chickens! Whether it was a lack



Fig. 16 *Viburnum macrocephalum* f. *keteleeri*



Fig. 17 *Cobaea pringlei*



Figs 18 & 19 The HPS stand at Harrogate and some of the team who made it happen

with slender twining stems, glossy evergreen leaves, and small white periwinkle blooms in spring. As for the future, I have a 2m Crepe Myrtle, *Lagerstroemia fauriei*, which is looking promising, and then there is a begonia with boldly-lobed leaves, *B. pedatifida*, given me this year from his garden in Cornwall by Brian Hiley on condition that I come up with a name. Life is never dull! Have a great year. 🌸

of suitable pollinators – I saw only one or two wasps visiting – or insufficient warmth, or a combination of the two I do not know, which leads me to enquire whether anyone reading this has an answer? Meanwhile, I have pruned the stems back to their base, restored their protective fleece and now hope for a repeat performance this coming year. *C. pringlei*, like *C. scandens*, is native to Mexico and was named for its discoverer, the American botanist Cyrus Guernsey Pringle (1838–1911). The first time I saw it was in the conservatory at Martyn Rix’s Devon home.

To close this roundup of personal highlights of 2011, I want to offer my thanks to all those groups and members who once again have given their time, enthusiasm and talents in furthering the Society’s aims and endeavours. I am especially proud of the continuing success of those involved in planning, staging and staffing exhibits at flower shows countrywide from Ayr in Scotland to Usk in Wales and Romsey in Hampshire. Congratulations and well done all of you. (Figs 18 & 19.)

Just one more thought, as we begin another year. I have long maintained that anticipation plays an important role in the therapeutic benefits of gardening, so why not plan on having at least one new plant in your garden, which you can look forward to performing for the first time in the coming year. For me in 2011 the *Cobaea* obliged. In 2012 I believe it will be the turn of *Elytropus chilensis*, a climbing member of the periwinkle family