

# A high-wire act

Judy Harry

One day last October I spent a fiddly few minutes separating some buttercup invaders from a clump of *Geum rivale* ‘Album’, a modest but pleasing little plant. Of course both plants enjoy the same friable, moist soil, and the leaf shapes are sufficiently similar to be quite difficult to distinguish in the dying light of an autumn afternoon. The task led me to ponder the general topic of weeds. Here we had what was undoubtedly A Weed – the buttercup – a plant in the wrong place, threatening the health of a plant that was meant to be there, which was therefore not a weed. Yet the geum, given ideal conditions and no competition, could itself soon become a weed if it spread too far and too wide, and started to threaten other plants. Which all goes to remind us that gardening is no more than a subtle balancing act between control and laissez faire, a balance which is likely to be affected by personal likes and dislikes on one side, and prevailing garden conditions on the other. A real high-wire act.

Weeding is a fascinating and sometimes instructive pastime. I presume that it is particular seasonal conditions which cause each year to have its dominant weed. A few years ago it was goosegrass, whose improbably thin basal stems support yards of arm-scratching ramblings which, if not removed in time, drop quantities of sticky burr-like seeds. On germinating, the seed-leaves for a short while look quite like those of honesty, calling for ‘careful selection’ – perhaps a good alternative phrase for ‘weeding’? In damp years, it tends to be chickweed that thrives; the satisfaction of locating the similarly spindly basal stems and using them as a handle with which to pull out whole carpets of the stuff is hard to beat (fig. 1); and what wonderful condition the soil is in, under this natural mulch of foliage! Or the joy of finding a dandelion in soil so well worked that its whole root can be pulled out without



Fig. 1 Pulling up whole carpets of the stuff



Fig. 2 Wonderful autumn colouring earns this otherwise weedy euphorbia a place in the garden

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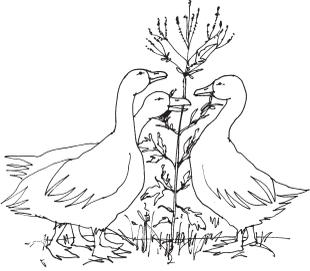


Fig. 3 An intruder in the goose paddock



Fig. 4 Wiry stems of wild vervain create an interesting effect



Fig. 5 A naturally attractive partnership

leaving any little bits behind. In propagating manuals, such bits would be referred to as root cuttings: in your and my garden they are an unmitigated pest. In this way we get to know a lot about plants, their growth habits, and their effect on their environment.

Last year it was petty spurge (*Euphorbia peplus*), a prolific little weed of disturbed ground, whose seeds I suspect benefited from the coat-crackingly-cold winter. Fortunately they are relatively easy to tweak out. I deliberately grow another euphorbia which seeds prolifically; I think it must be plain green *Euphorbia dulcis*, better known in its mildew-prone, purple-leaved form *E. d.* 'Chameleon'. Whatever it is, I mutter irritably to myself in the spring when having to remove countless little plants which have resulted from seeds pinging on to the gravel near the parent plant, which thrives in a poor and sunny situation next to an old clipped yew. When late summer comes, however, I stand and admire the fantastic flaming orange and red of its persistent bracts, standing out boldly against the glossy dark green foliage (fig. 2). Thus, while in spring I regard it as a weed, in autumn it is most definitely a valued garden plant.

Getting to know both the weedy, often wild, members of a genus and the more desirable garden ones is an interesting exercise in itself. The trend towards milder winters, so spectacularly confounded by the events of November and December 2010, had made *Verbena bonariensis* into a more or less reliably perennial stalwart for the late-summer garden. It had aroused my interest in this genus, and I was intrigued to find *V. officinalis* (vervain) (fig. 3) growing as an escape in the goose paddock. It has the characteristically wiry stems of its cousins, studded with tiny flowers, and has a sort of textural interest, quite like a scrunched-up roll of wire netting (fig. 4). It makes quite large, indestructible plants, seeds very freely, and the geese don't

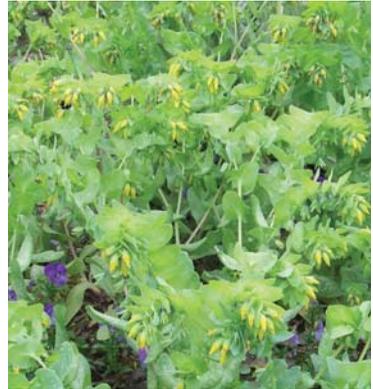
keep on top of it, so my botanical interest will probably be superseded by practical common sense. (Which means it will be regarded as A Weed and be removed). Not so *V. hastata* f. *rosea*, which I am pleased to say has settled into a sunny border of light sandy soil. It is not now where I first planted it, but last year it had self-seeded in front of an unnamed alstroemeria with whose colouring it blends most artistically (fig. 5). I hope it will continue to choose such good companions.



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Fig. 6 A good food source in the spring

Weeds, or wild flowers, can of course perform a useful function for wildlife. In spite of freezing winter temperatures only weeks before, spring 2011 found early-flowering red deadnettle on a patch of fallow ground providing vital food for bumblebees (fig. 6). In May last year, in the stunning Bee and Butterfly borders in the Cambridge Botanic Garden, there were swathes of wild plants among the cultivated ones. *Cerinthe glabra* (yellow-flowered cousin to the fashion plant of the 1980s, *C. major* ‘Purpurascens’) (fig. 7) and deep-red-flowered *Cynoglossum officinale* looked very impressive. Introducing them into flower borders would have to be done with care, as both could become weeds of the most prolific sort, but they would certainly keep the bees happy.



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Fig. 7 *Cerinthe glabra*

As a novice gardener (fig. 8), I had little understanding of the way in which many bulbs spread so freely by bulbils or seed: I suppose I just didn’t ask myself where all the grape hyacinths were coming from! In common with many gardeners, I find the swathes of foliage of the common *Muscari neglectum*, lolling about all over the place, very irritating. Which is why it is such a joy to grow *M. azureum* (fig. 9), not only because I love the colour of the flowers, but because the foliage is so much tidier. However, it is proving to be as generous with its seedlings as its cousin is with its leaves. Time will tell whether this pretty bulb will earn the designation of weed. Nearby is one of the celandines, *Ranunculus ficaria* ‘Randall’s White’ (fig. 10), whose flowers are in fact more top-of-the-milk cream than



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Fig. 8 As a novice gardener, I had little understanding of the self-seeding habits of bulbs

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Fig. 9 A forest of little seedlings already surrounds *Muscari azureum*

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Fig. 10 A tiny dark-leaved seedling has appeared under the leaves of *Ranunculus ficaria* 'Randall's White'

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Fig. 11 Handsome pokers of berries are a valuable autumn feature of *Arum* 'Chameleon'

white. I bought it at an HPS AGM, which always presents opportunities for adding little gems to our spring gardens. Last year I noticed that a seedling with dark leaves was nestling under its leaves, so it looks as if a seed of something like *R. f.* 'Brazen Hussy' must have hitched a ride in the compost. A bonus, although I can almost hear my mother questioning the wisdom of growing any celandines, since her garden was infested with the wild form, a major weed for her.

Also featuring in the spring is *Arum* 'Chameleon' (fig. 11). I have loved this plant since first acquiring it, I think, at another HPS meeting. The subtle marking on the leaves is lovely, but not quite as lovely is its ability to self-seed, usually as a true form, around the garden. The logic would be to remove the pokers of orange berries in the autumn, for they must

be attractive to birds, who drop the seeds all over the place, having devoured the surrounding flesh. But to remove them is to rob the late-autumn garden of a very fine feature. I have yet to solve this dilemma.

It's a source of great satisfaction that the more unusual and expensive snowdrops often establish themselves just as merrily as the common ones. In one border, *Galanthus elwesii* 'Comet' hops about among equally adventurous *Corydalis solida* and, as they both disappear below ground by May, they leave plenty of space for later flowering *Lunaria annua* var. *albiflora* 'Alba Variegata', *Lychnis coronaria*, *Alstroemeria psittacina* and *Nicotiana sylvestris*, all of which persist by seeds or spreading roots



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Fig. 12 *Corydalis solida* and the bold leaves of *Galanthus elwesii* 'Comet' will have disappeared by the time other plants in this border are needing space to flower



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Fig. 13 The sumptuous flower of the old double orange *Hemerocallis*; shame about the leaves

(fig. 12). I leave them to get on with it, and value all of these spreading, but to my mind non-weedy, plants.

Which, of course, brings us back to the fact that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, with weeds more so than most. I now regret having planted the good old (1860) *Hemerocallis fulva* 'Flore Pleno' (fig. 13) for its burnt-orange colouring. I still love its flowers, but oh those leaves... I haven't quite got to the point of one gardener I know, whose garden was so infested with a pink autumn-flowering anemone that she resorted to glyphosate to get rid of it, as did a neighbour of ours with her too-plentiful patches of lily of the valley. It can be very discouraging for anyone who's trying to establish either of these plants in their own garden. It can also be infuriating when, having confessed to failure, another gardener says with an unmistakable air of smugness "Oh, it grows like a weed for me", the implication being that one is not really trying, or that the prolificacy of the plant in question is somehow a compliment to the (smug) gardener (fig. 14). We all know that plants have their own ideas about what constitutes a suitable home, which is where garden conditions come into the balancing act.

I have had to persevere to get pretty *Orlaya grandiflora* established here. The advice is always to allow it to self-seed but, as with getting a job (no experience – no job; no job – no experience) one has to get it to grow in the first place. Anyway, last year it did eventually flower for me, and I have been sprinkling the seeds around while making



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Fig. 14 "Oh, it grows like a weed for me..."

encouraging noises. Perhaps it would be easier to get *Ammi majus* going. Christopher Lloyd, in his lovely book *Colour for Adventurous Gardeners*, advises sowing it in autumn. I suspect that it was his gardening style that influenced the striking bed of dahlias and *Ammi majus* in the Cut Flower Garden at Scampston in July 2011 (fig. 15). A more rational gardener than me might ask why I was striving to grow plants that look

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Fig. 15 *Dahlia* 'David Howard' contrast with the lacy flowers of *Ammi majus*

very like the wild cow parsley that thrives outside the confines of the garden, and inside it too if I haven't spotted a green seedling among the patch of dark-leaved *Anthriscus sylvestris* 'Ravenswing'. The answer, of course, is that we strive all the time to grow new things, to expand our horticultural horizons, to face up to a challenge... I could go on, but will spare you.

In my garden various plants have succeeded to the point of becoming welcome weeds. Having planted up a bed of Sweet William for cutting, I was surprised to find how freely and easily it establishes itself as a 'perennial biennial' wherever its seeds can reach. Next to it is a bed of Dutch iris, also grown for cutting, and this too has become a mass of bulbs and, in due course, flowers, without any effort at all on my part. I'm not sure how well they would do in the rough and tumble of a mixed border, though. In recent years, *Campanula trachelium* has made great strides in its attempt to take over the world, or my small corner of it anyway. I am ruthless about pulling out what I don't want, and likewise removing any plants that show signs of campanula rust, which is, annoyingly, a quite common occurrence. Where I leave plants they put on a fine show in various shades of blue, and occasionally white, and as always with self-seeders, in places where I would never have thought of putting them (fig. 16).

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Fig. 16 I would probably never have planted this *Campanula trachelium* here myself

Weediness doesn't always depend on seeding, as anyone who has tried to get rid of ground elder, couch grass or bindweed will know. (Funny how I always seem to end up mentioning bindweed.) The lovely species roses known collectively as the Burnet Roses (fig. 17) have very spreading roots and for this reason in the trade they are often budded on to less invasive stock. The only time I tried growing one such, I found that it struggled, whereas the two I planted on their own roots do much better. It's in their nature, I think, to refresh

themselves by spreading to new ground. This means that one must place them where it's possible to prune out older growths while tolerating a certain amount of unplanned re-establishment elsewhere.

Also spreading by the root, *Phlox paniculata* has surprised me with its territorial ambitions (fig. 18). Phloxes have a bit of a struggle here as summers are often so dry, but mulching has helped it to become a reliable and long-flowering presence with its delicate starry flowers. But it is spreading, and probably for the same reason that the rose does – to find fresh ground. I must refresh the soil before doing some replanting. Another phlox, *P. paniculata* 'Lichtspel' (one of Piet Oudolf's introductions) also spreads, whereas one that came from my mother's garden clumps up only slowly.

Dry summers don't worry *Agastache*, which therefore does well here and gently self-seeds. I was very taken with *A.* 'Black Adder' at Harlow Carr, planted with *Salvia nemorosa* 'Amethyst' and *Geranium Rozanne* (front cover). However, I understand it to be a sterile hybrid, so there will be no chance of its becoming a self-seeder if/when I get hold of a plant. In the meantime, golden-leaved *A. rugosa* 'Golden Jubilee' (fig. 19) thrives and generally produces one or two true progeny. They are easy to move and place where they will make a useful contribution.

An aspect of usefulness that has only recently dawned on me is to make the most of some self-perpetuating, and therefore free, plants as fillers in seasonal troughs and pots. *Milium effusum* 'Aureum' proved invaluable for bulking up a planting of dahlia and antirrhinum in a stone trough (fig. 20). Small seedlings were potted up in the previous autumn and they grew on to make nice chunky little plants by the following May. Interestingly, in the trough they remained quite compact and did not run to flower and seed, and thereby continued to serve their purpose until hoiked



Fig. 17 I've learned to let *Rosa x harisonii* 'Williams Double Yellow' go where it wants, as long as it still partners golden *Cornus alba* 'Aurea'



Fig. 18 Delicate starry flowers top the tall stems of *Phlox paniculata*



Fig. 19 The golden foliage of *Agastache* 'Golden Jubilee' really zings

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Fig. 20 A jolly mix of *Dahlia* 'Lolo' and antirrhinum, filled out with *Miliun effusum* 'Aureum'

*obtusum*, *Polystichum setiferum* Divisilobum Group and a striking, still unidentified, ivy. (Suggestions please to the Editor.) They look well because the cool and damp conditions at the root suit them, a factor that leads to the success of moisture-loving plantings beside streams and in gullies. At York Gate (fig. 22), visited on the 2010 Summer Gardens Day, the impressive Stream Garden with *Darmera peltata*, *Lysichiton* and *Matteuccia struthiopteris* made a beautifully cool and peaceful picture. I was therefore rather startled to find *Lysichiton* on the list of potentially dangerous and invasive plants on the Plantlife website<sup>1</sup>.

After countless magazine articles and media features, we are all familiar with the danger of invasive aliens outcompeting our natives. Sad in a way, because Himalayan



Fig. 21 One never tires of green foliage in all its variety



Fig. 22 Cool green shade in the Streamside Garden at York Gate

out when it was time for the winter bedding to take their place. Seedlings of *Elymus magellanicus* have also come in useful for providing height and contrast in pots, and I use a dark-leaved bugle and golden feverfew this way, as fillers.

We rely on foliage, too, to complete the bigger picture. A group of all-green, but contrasting plants, for example, growing as happily as weeds, is a lovely sight (fig. 21). I have in mind a group consisting of *Iris pseudacorus*, *Sanguisorba*

*Balsam* is a beautiful plant with a haunting perfume, and giant hogweed, with its burning sap and unstoppable advance, is a handsome brute<sup>2</sup>. So to find a much-extended list of plants that could be regarded as mad, bad and dangerous to know is also rather alarming. Would you

have regarded *Cotoneaster horizontalis* as a threat to the countryside? I admit that I have frequently seen seedlings occurring outside gardens, because birds don't understand about emptying their systems in designated areas, but I am saddened that it should be demonised in this way, as also is the Turkey Oak, and the Evergreen Oak. Moreover, I am puzzled (fig. 23) by the list of suggested alternative 'safe' plants that the site recommends; it seems a very odd collection to me. See what you think.<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 23 I am puzzled by this odd collection

Having said all this, I know that I am guilty, albeit unintentionally, of introducing an alien into the countryside. A fine, golden-leaved comfrey, *Symphytum ibericum* 'All Gold', has managed to travel a good 5m across thickly planted ground, through a hawthorn hedge and on to the adjacent road verge (fig. 24), where its acid-yellow leaves shine triumphantly among emerging nettles and cow parsley (q.v.) until fading to a more anonymous green.

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Fig. 24 Making a break for it!

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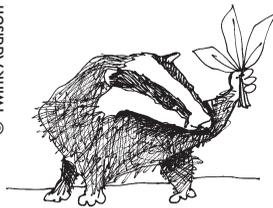


Fig. 25 Is the badger on the internet?

Fortunately, this comfrey doesn't seem to run like others, and simply clumps up. But it must produce viable, and true, seeds, which I suspect a badger has carried on its feet to pastures new. I wonder if the badger is on the internet? (Fig. 25) 🐾

**Judy Harry** anticipates some feedback to this article, so feel free: don't hold back!

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.plantlife.org.uk/campaigns/invasive\\_plants](http://www.plantlife.org.uk/campaigns/invasive_plants)

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the December issue of RHS magazine The Garden carried an article questioning the danger of invasive aliens.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.plantlife.org.uk//campaigns/invasive\\_plants/alternatives/](http://www.plantlife.org.uk//campaigns/invasive_plants/alternatives/)