

From Sussex to Como

Penelope S Hellyer

Who was it said that gardeners sell their gardens, not their homes? Built by my parents, our pretty house in Sussex sat snugly within its mature garden. The hard landscaping, and the development and planting of the many borders, undertaken since I took over the garden in the late 1970s and embellished further when I met my husband Philip in 1989, had made it a piece of paradise. Even now, seven years after selling up, it is my garden I miss.

The decision to leave Sussex was difficult enough – to leave all my favourite plants would have pushed me too near the edge. My husband thought it OK to “buy replacements”. How could I do that! The pure white hellebore – a gift from the late Rosemary Verey – was the first to be sliced through and potted up. *Galanthus* ‘Titania’ and *G.* ‘Atkinsii’, *Fritillaria pontica*, *Scilla messeniaca*, *Sternbergia lutea* and *Ipheion uniflorum* followed. Hellebores – a dusky almost-black from the nursery of Elizabeth Strangman, an emerald-green seedling, and another with rounded petals of palest lemon-drop yellow – were added to the collection. Several grasses, roses, hardy geraniums, more herbaceous plants and a few shrubs followed. Each time Philip returned from work, the bench in front of the potting shed was fuller. “You can’t take all these – you’ll need another van.” In fact the removal company packed so well that only one lorry was needed, just a quarter filled with plants. All were approved by Defra – *Rhododendron*, *Camellia* and *Quercus* the only exclusions.

Our new home is in the village of Lenno, on the western shore of Lake Como, and in mid-summer one of the sunniest villages. (Fig. 1) Our villa has a backdrop of Mt di Lenno and Mt di Tremezzo.

Gardening here is a challenge. The soil is sandy and at most a few centimetres deep, then you hit rock. The climate is also



Fig. 1 Looking past the pine to mountains



Fig. 2 *Dianthus arenarius*



Fig. 3 *Nerium oleander* double form

challenging. May 2005 was, we learnt later, the hottest for many years. Before we could plant them, many plants were lost in the intense heat, though kept watered in the shade. Winter that year was also extreme, the most severe for decades, with almost a metre of snow falling in thirty-six hours.

Little had been done to the garden – it had previously been a holiday home. We have made many changes. Two large stone pines, one growing on a steep bank near the road, the other in the back, dominated the garden. Both needed drastic reduction. When we sought permission to do the work, the commune recommended that the specimen in the back garden be removed. We replaced it with *Liquidambar styraciflua*, which we chose in autumn, when its glowing mahogany reminded me of the richly coloured one we'd left. The nurseryman warned us that it wouldn't be that colour the

following autumn, and he was right: the lack of acidity in the soil made a dramatic difference to the colour of the foliage the following year. But it doesn't disappoint; the fresh lime green in spring deepens to mid-green through the summer, and lightens and sometimes yellows in the autumn. It is also much cleaner and tidier than the pine.

Beneath the liquidambar, in the dappled morning sunlight, grows *Dianthus arenarius* (fig. 2). I had bought it many years ago, partly because I was assured it grew well in the shade and also because it was different. Single deeply fringed white flowers, above bright green, compact, grass-like foliage, fill the garden with sweet fragrance from early May until a solitary flower remains in mid-July, whilst the rest of the plant is covered with seedheads. I sprinkled them on compost, covered them with vermiculite, and put them on a granite windowsill which gets the sun for only a few hours a day; I was rewarded with germination within five days.

Calamintha nepeta subsp. *nepeta*, planted nearby, is more floriferous here than in Sussex. It enjoys the thin sandy soil. I cut it back at the end of July to rejuvenate the foliage and enjoy some later flowers. *Verbena bonariensis* flowers and seeds readily, but is much shorter here.

My seedling acers, now fourteen years old, and always in pots, were planted in the ground out of direct sunlight. Two have thrived, but one on a dry stony slope dies back in the middle every year. Pink *Nerium oleander* (fig. 3) was one of the shrubs that I had always considered special (because it's double), but here it is used widely as a street tree and as a shrub in many gardens.

I planted *Rosa* 'William Lobb', tying it to the iron boundary railings. It flowers, but not as generously as it had done in England. *R.* 'Zéphirine Drouhin', which had grown on a north wall in Sussex, is now in full sun; it suffers a little – foliage a lighter green, and flowers all too quickly over.

The front steps to the house are edged on one side with three square planters. This area is under the overhang of the roof so gets no sun or rain. In the lowest square, *Sarcococca hookeriana* var. *humilis* has gradually pushed out *Geranium* Rozanne and *G. nodosum* 'Saucy Charlie', and, with its thicket-like habit, is set to fill the square completely in a couple of years. Above, *Geranium dalmaticum* flowers profusely in March, then leans leggly towards the light. In the same square *Melica altissima* 'Atropurpurea' is also leggy but seeds itself around.

The top square is home to *Jasminum beesianum*, a twining woody climber with fragrant pinkish-red flowers in March/April, much earlier than in Sussex. Maybe because of the coolness of the portico, it is semi-evergreen, hanging on untidily to its brown



Fig. 4 *Acacia dealbata* (mimosa)

leaves. Alongside the jasmine I planted *Fritillaria pontica*, *Pulmonaria* 'Lewis Palmer' and *Primula* 'Val Horncastle', a double yellow primrose. Only the fritillaria remains. The pulmonaria died; moved elsewhere, 'Val Horncastle' hangs on by a thread. *Cyclamen hederifolium* and *Muscari* now give spring interest at the foot of the jasmine.



Fig. 5 *Clematis* 'My Angel'

clumped up at all in six years but they make a welcome show and seed generously. Later, forget-me-nots run riot here, drawing much admiration from passers-by.

The mimosa (*Acacia dealbata*) (fig. 4) in this border was split in two by our first snows. We replaced it, as we love the small balls of bright yellow flowers, and the tradition of giving a stem to the favourite ladies in your life on International Women's Day, 8th March. I moved the two expelled geraniums here, where they've clumped up nicely. Under the canopy of an inherited acer I planted some lily of the valley, which my mother had planted in the 1930s when they started their garden, and *Scilla messeniaca*, another favourite from Sussex. I may need to move them as the acer has grown at such a pace that the bulbs are in virtual darkness. *Leucojum aestivum*, planted outside the acer's canopy but shaded from intense summer sun, has increased sufficiently to be shared with new friends.

Hydrangeas have flourished here, and cuttings root easily in this shady area. Just strip off the bottom leaves and push the cuttings directly into the soil: some die, but enough survive to extend the planting.

We have added to this border – *Hosta*, *Hemerocallis*, *Heuchera* and *Achillea* bought, infuriatingly, usually without a name or, if you are lucky, no other than 'Hosta'. Our local nursery has improved since we arrived but many plants are still not labelled.

Our plants from home have fared variously. *Clematis* 'My Angel' (fig. 5) has glaucous foliage and the sweetest orange-peel flowers. It had clambered high up the east wall and was a mass of flower for several months. Here, by July the first flowers are finished and seed is already set. If the seedheads are removed we are blessed with more flowers and, as so often here, seedlings proliferate. *Trachelospermum*

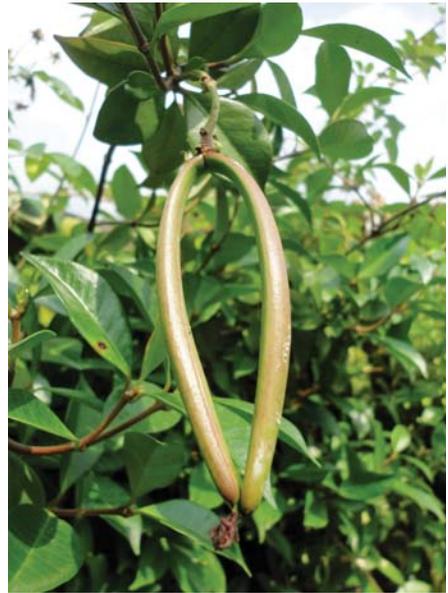
On the other side of the steps is a wide border. In summer its outer edges get a little sun until noon, the outer curve in the late afternoon; in the winter the majority gets no sun at all. If the temperature drops the ground remains frozen for several months, with no sun, should it shine, to warm it. It is in this inhospitable environment that the hellebores survive. They push their early flowers through in December, sometimes waiting a month or more before they push any further. They haven't

jasminoides seedpods are developing by July; they hang bean-like in pairs, apparently linked at the bottom, then as they grow in length, often one growing longer than the other, they separate at the lower tip. When the ripe chestnut-brown pod is open, one sees a jam of seeds, packed like miniature parachutes within the case, with silky tassels to float easily away (figs 6 & 7).

Rudbeckia fulgida var. *sullivanii* ‘Goldsturm’ shows its sunny disposition in mid-June, long before it did in Sussex, and, with deadheading, continues to bloom until the cold weather. The few irises I brought always flower well. Diminutive *I.* ‘Blue Delight’ (fig. 8) has powder-blue flowers on 15cm stems in March and April. *I.* ‘Black Swan’ doesn’t disappoint either. From a pale green calyx emerges a deep purple flower, so dark it’s almost black. The grey-green foliage gently unwraps the flower as if it is a treasured gift – which it is. It is only now that I can study my few plants so closely, camera always at the ready.

Paeonia lactiflora ‘Bowl of Beauty’ loves its position in full sun for a few hours each day. Previously I had only admired it in flower. Now close to the house, it is enjoyed from the early tight green buds, which fatten daily, covered with tiny ants presumably licking the stickiness the bud exudes, to its seedpods (fig. 9). *Agapanthus* ‘Bressingham White’ flowers well but its blooms are all too soon over. The colour is much appreciated by our Italian neighbours, who have *agapanthus galore* but only in many shades of blue.

I brought *Alchemilla mollis* with me for its sheer exuberance and ability to spread itself. Not so in Italy: it flowers, and if deadheaded rewards me with more, but it hasn’t made one seedling and would fit into the same size pot that it travelled in – but it is still alive.



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Figs 6 & 7 *Trachelospermum jasminoides* seedpods

Fig. 8 *Iris* 'Blue Delight'Fig. 9 *Paeonia lactiflora* 'Bowl of Beauty' seedpods

A narrow 'orto' – a vegetable garden – ran along the hedge on the west of the plot. Sage and rosemary were the only plants. We grow a variety of vegetables through the year. The soil was vastly better than that in the rest of our plot, and it's improved yearly by our compost – we probably have the only compost heaps in Lenno – which Philip always claims for the vegetable garden. When he shovels it away we find within the compost chafer grubs the size of my little finger – we believe it is these that work and sift the waste material so well.

The lawn appears to be mainly couch grass, as are most of the gardens in the neighbourhood. Some of the larger villas, visited only during August by the owners, have beautiful green lawns untouched by a wild flower: the Italian term is '*prato verde all'inglese*', which translates as 'green meadow of the English'. We, of course, are trying to create an English garden, and, against all the odds of soil and climate, I sometimes dare to believe we're succeeding. 🌱

Penelope Hellyer ran a small specialist nursery from her garden at Orchards, Rowfant, Sussex, opening the garden – originally planted by Arthur Hellyer and his wife Gay – for charity. Her book about the garden at Orchards, *The Haphazard Gardener*, will be available soon.

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