

The fruits of our labours

Janet Sleep

After the extremes of drought, rain and cold this year, I can only guess at what we'll see later on, but what a fruitful year 2011 was – truly a cornucopia. The fruit arch groaned under the weight and all the apples except for the russets developed a brilliant red, high gloss and lasted on the trees for weeks. We gorged on the crisp, sweet flesh. This was courtesy of a long warm spring and a sunny September after a cool late summer. But it was not just the vegetable and fruit garden that benefited: many ornamental plants fruited heavily too. For years I have been adding to my collection of plants that contribute something extra and when I am out garden visiting I am always on the lookout for more: good in the fruit and seed department counts very high.

One of the great pleasures given by growing mahonias is the long chains of bloomy blue fruits that many develop after flowering. Especially elegant is *Mahonia pallida*, which has a delicate, open inflorescence, so that the jewel-like fruits hang like droplets suspended precariously after rain. The plant is a tall but slender individual with less of the bulk of its better known relatives and none of the prickles: it deserves a better spot than the desperate crush between competing box plants where I have it now, though being a Mexican it might just be enjoying a box duvet. More compact in every way, but with equally soft foliage, which occurs in ruff-like rosettes, is the autumn flowering *M. eurybracteata* (fig. 1) – its bunches of blue berries start to colour in January.

© Janet Sleep



Fig. 1 *Mahonia eurybracteata* beginning to fruit in January. The plant tops out at a metre high but also produces basal growth which flowers and fruits early. The plant develops a tiered effect.

© Janet Sleep



Fig. 2 This mystery, monster *Berberis* at Hidcote produces an impenetrable thicket but what a glory in September.

Mahonia is closely related to *Berberis*, so it is no surprise to find many *Berberis* with fine fruit displays. The stunning plant to be found on the edge of the garden at Hidcote (fig. 2) would be a must if you had the room: it is BIG. The leaves are a pale, grey-green and the drooping branches weighted with first pinkish-grey then brilliant sealing-wax-red fruits. *B. wilsoniae*, at about a metre, would give you some of this effect. *Berberis* are underrated, easy plants to grow anywhere, and do not need to be purple-leaved.

Paeonia cambessedesii (fig. 3), however, requires one of your best spots, well drained though not drought ridden, protected though not choked by other plants, and not frazzled by too much sun. I have it at the foot of a south-facing wall, which it shares with a campsis and a clematis, but it is half shaded by other plants nearby. It has all the virtues, from its exciting red buds and stems to its green-grey puckered foliage, its charming single pink flowers with the pretty boss of stamens to its stunning seed pods which open in the autumn. The scarlet, unfertilised fruits nestle in a crumpled mass of magenta chiffon, while the black fertilised berries look as if they have been given a regulation shoe shine with the best boot polish – colours fit for an imperial guard.

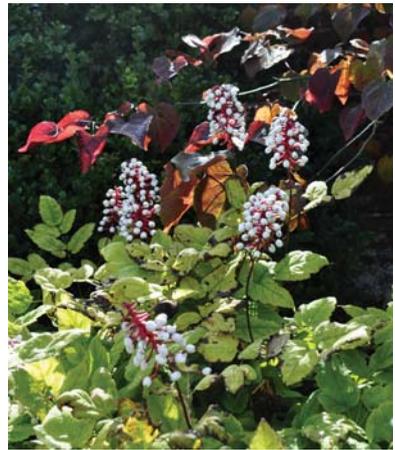
An altogether easier plant, given some shade and shelter, is *Actaea rubra* f. *neglecta* (fig. 4). It has lovely, almost fern-like foliage, though insignificant flower sprays. Just when you had forgotten all about it, some time in September, it will surprise and delight with these wonderful spikes of white, red-stalked berries, each with a black ‘doll’s eye’. They look particularly good seen here with *Cercis canadensis* ‘Forest Pansy’ foliage in a wide, shady border at Scampston.

Come September, many plants are producing not berries, but seed encased in papery seed cases or, if you are particularly lucky, ornamental bracts that continue to charm even as the petals are falling. Fig. 5 shows one



Fig. 3 Opened seed pods of *Paeonia cambessedesii*. The effect is of a jewel casket.

© Janet Sleep



© Janet Sleep

Fig. 4 *Actaea rubra* f. *neglecta* with *Cercis canadensis* ‘Forest Pansy’ at Scampston. The plant needs a shady, sheltered spot.

such – *Agastache* ‘Blackadder’ at the end of its long season at Dove Cottage Nursery garden in Yorkshire. It is seen here amongst a mass of a very good new grass, *Calamagrostis brachytricha* ‘Mona’ (a more open form of *C. brachytricha*), its haze of violet echoing the retained colour in the whorled bracts of the agastache flower spikes. While these are indeed fruiting bodies, any seed produced is reputedly mostly sterile, so you will not get a mass of unwanted, inferior seedlings. The leaves smell of aniseed too. The plant wants sun and good drainage, though it seemed to be thriving particularly well when I saw it on a cold northern hillside washed by deluges of good Yorkshire rain.

You have probably cut off the papery seed cases of *Allium sphaerocephalon* before they get to the interesting stage shown in fig. 6, either because you don’t want them seeding around profusely in your main border or because they have fallen over before then and look a mess. Here’s one answer to this dilemma. The allium has been paired with a strong growing *Sedum* ‘Matrona’ in a narrow border backed by *Miscanthus*. The allium really has nowhere to go and the sedum gives it just sufficient support, while the silvery seed cases echo the plumes on the miscanthus behind. This association occurs in more than one spot at Pensthorpe, Norfolk, in Piet Oudolf’s Millennium Garden, so it is more than a happy accident. Sedums need renewing fairly frequently, but digging the soil around them will not harm the alliums at all as they appear to be indestructible.

Fig. 7 shows another view of Pensthorpe, showing the great sweeps of planting that Piet Oudolf has become

© Janet Sleep



Fig. 5 *Agastache* ‘Blackadder’ fronting a cloud of *Calamagrostis* ‘Mona’ at Dove Cottage Nursery garden in September.

© Janet Sleep



Fig. 6 *Allium sphaerocephalon* in September amidst *Sedum* ‘Matrona’. The silvery seedheads of the allium tone with the plumes of *Miscanthus sinensis* behind.

famous for. The great charm in this scene arises from the erect plumes of drying, chestnut-coloured flowerheads on the *Astilbe chinensis* var. *taquetii* ‘Purpurlanze’ against the straw-coloured *deschampsia* foliage. Without this backing the astilbe would not look so exciting, merely drab and dull, losing all that architectural pizzazz: the pale grass is an essential component of the scene. Now you probably do not need me to give you a health warning about this style of planting but here it is anyway: in order to produce this effect you need to have space and lots of it. A few plants dotted about will not do at all. You also need an army of gardeners to deal with the *deschampsia* seedlings. Each plant is capable of producing millions of seeds and they germinate readily under all conditions. You need sun and a moist soil. They have a high water table here at Pensthorpe in dry Norfolk, but their astilbes are only prevented from frying up by the judicious addition of water when needed. Here in South Norfolk, I grow only two astilbes and they survive only because they are under a north wall in the splash from a wall fountain. I understand that even Piet Oudolf is now thinking about a substitute for the *deschampsia*, and *Sporobolus* seems to be a likely candidate.

While the grasses and herbaceous plants are fading from buff and straw to brown and sere, there are other plants just coming into their own. I am a fan of hollies, which cheer the late autumn and early winter, mostly in red and glossy green. The birds take these berries very swiftly but they excite in their short period of high noon. *Ilex aquifolium* ‘Amber’ (fig. 8) is shocking in its glorious berry profusion, seen here against a bright blue November sky in Peter Boardman’s holly orchard at How Hill in Norfolk. Childhood traumas, possibly something to do with too much orange juice in infancy,



Fig. 7 *Astilbe*, *Deschampsia* and *Agastache* at Pensthorpe, Norfolk in early autumn – a Piet Oudolf tour de force.



Fig. 8 *Ilex aquifolium* ‘Amber’ at How Hill in Norfolk in November.

© Janet Sleep

© Janet Sleep



Fig. 9 The startling pink winter stems of *Acer pensylvanicum* 'Erythrocladum' emerge from a mass of amethyst-coloured fruits of *Callicarpa bodinieri* var. *giraldi* 'Profusion' in October.

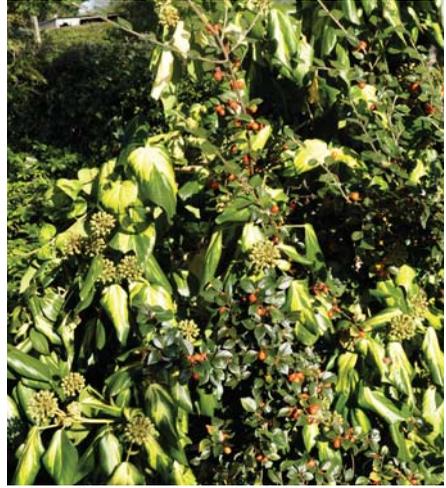


Fig. 10 *Hedera colchica* 'Sulphur Heart' fruiting lazily amongst the erect branches of *Cotoneaster simonsii*

make some folk orange phobic. *Ilex* 'Amber' surely would be the cure. A Hillier introduction, with an AGM, and its fruits persist well – what more can you ask? And if orange berries are a touch psychedelic, try these amethyst berries on *Callicarpa bodinieri* var. *giraldi* 'Profusion' (fig. 9) teamed up here with *Acer pensylvanicum* 'Erythrocladum' to give you that slightly surreal, feet not quite on the floor, feeling. All this needs is a clump of the late-flowering *Chrysanthemum* 'Mrs Jessie Cooper No. 2' in wild fuchsia pink to give you total lift off.

To bring you safely back to earth, cast your eyes over fig. 10 – nothing here to frighten the horses: in fact, you can see the horse's shelter just peeking in the picture in the background. Here is Rosemary Verey's favourite, *Hedera colchica* 'Sulphur Heart' (though she called it 'Paddy's Pride') in all its lush, green, cream and yellow fruiting glory. The plant, like an amiable drunk, is leaning on its neighbour, *Cotoneaster simonsii*, rather than climbing up the post that has been provided. The cotoneaster is a stalwart friend, upright and guardsmanlike, with shiny, polished red buttons – he would not let a partner down. We should all have friends like this. 🐾

Janet Sleep has delighted in the deluges of 2012 after the desperate drought conditions prevailing in her Norfolk garden over the previous year. Nobody in Norfolk ever complains about rain. But excessive sunshine and lack of frost does have some compensations, as this article shows.