

# Looking forwards by looking back!

Heather Booker

It's become a tradition here to count the flowers in bloom on the shortest day, the Winter Solstice. Twenty years on from its inception, looking back at the longest list, in the year 1994, I'm determined to rectify the paucity of the flower-count on 21<sup>st</sup> December 2013.

In 1994 there were 113 flowers in bloom, last year there were fewer than 40. There are a number of reasons, chiefly the weather: we'd had only one night of frost, and temperatures were just above freezing for a week in early December, but the main enemy was the severe gales bearing salt-laden spume from the sea just 400m away. I can't do much about the weather, but a lot of the 1994 plants are missing from the garden now. So I've spent the days non-conductive to gardening deep in past copies of *The Hardy Plant*, the *Plant Finder*, and on websites, making lists of 'must-haves' and looking forward to plant sales and garden visits.

## Inside looking out

So which flowers cheered me last year, visible from the sitting room, and which plants were giving structure or interest in those gloomy days.

As our deep, wooded valley on the North Devon coast runs east-west, no sun penetrates the garden for two months; cornus and acers (and anything else) don't benefit from being back-lit. Colour came from large clumps of a late-flowering, very dark pink *Nerine* 'Hilda', named after my mother who brought it to this garden more than 30 years ago. Very close to the nerine, and blending beautifully with it, is *Geranium* 'Elworthy Eyecatcher' (fig. 1). Raised by Jenny Spiller of Elworthy Cottage Plants near Taunton, it has bright magenta-pink flowers for 9 months of the year and is non-invasive. Its



Fig. 1 *Geranium* 'Elworthy Eyecatcher'

© Elworthy Cottage Plants



Fig. 2 *Vinca difformis* 'Snowmound'

© Gill Heavens



Figs 3 & 4 *Fuchsia obconica* and *F. microphylla*



Fig. 5 *Iris unguicularis* 'Mary Barnard'

spring leaves are a light, bright yellowy-green, edged cream, and turn mid-green just as the flowers start to bloom. What wonderful garden value! I find the plants I buy from Jenny and Mike do very well in my garden – I think they establish more quickly because they are grown in peat-free compost.

*Hesperantha coccinea* 'November Cheer' (also known as *Schizostylis*) and *H. c.* 'Zeal Salmon' (a gift from the late Terry Jones, a very generous Devon plantsman) would bloom even better if I moved them from under the *Betula pendula* 'Youngii' to a damper place... it's on my to do list! *Vinca difformis* 'Snowmound' (fig. 2) has been warned that Judy Harry says give it a hair-cut with a strimmer in late spring [*The Hardy Plant* Vol. 29 No. 1]. It covers part of the house wall, facing east, with glossy green leaves and an abundance of pure white flowers all winter. *Fuchsia obconica* and *F. microphylla* (figs 3 & 4), just outside the window (and they need to be close as the flowers are a mere 10mm long), have been flowering since August and will go on until we get frosts, as will the other fuchsias that survived the gales.

*Iris unguicularis* 'Mary Barnard' AGM (fig. 5), with its sweet perfume, is happy growing in gravel in front of a south-facing wall, and delights the senses from November through January whenever the temperature is above 5C. My acquisitions book tells me that it was one of the first plants that the Devon Group of the then NCCPG, now Plant

Heritage, distributed through committee members in 1988 in an endeavour to make this desirable plant more readily available. Lady Anne Palmer was its generous donor.

*Heuchera americana* 'Harry Hay' (fig. 6) is a super plant with self-supporting flower stalks and large heads of white flowers about 40cm high in summer, topping a mound of healthy, glossy, orange-brown foliage; definitely 'a presence' in this garden. (I like the description of *Heuchera* 'Regina' AGM ... "one of the toughest and most resilient, featuring reddish-purple foliage overlaid with silver markings, a neat mound of foliage from which come spikes of pink flowers in spring", also the slightly ruffled, sharp-toothed foliage of *Heuchera* 'Sashay' AGM. I've got 'em both on my list.)

### More Desirable Plants!

*Argyranthemum* 'Jamaica Primrose' AGM (fig.7) perished in one of the cold winters but it was in bloom in December '94. I'm looking forward to acquiring it again; a bushy, slightly woody plant, it flowers consistently throughout the summer and well into autumn. I also had plain *Heliopsis helianthoides*, but I hope I can find *H. h.* var. *scabra* 'Benzinggold' AGM, which is said to be 'prolific, easily manageable and if cut back in late May to reduce the height, produces an abundance of warm orange, semi-double flowers with deep orange-gold discs'.

Another 'must have' replacement for a fatality is *Daphne bholua* 'Jacqueline Postill' (fig. 8), one of the best of all the winter-flowering shrubs, with red buds opening to large white flowers, but it needs a sheltered corner. I want it near enough to be able to just open the front door and appreciate its intoxicating fragrance, so something will have to



Fig. 6 *Heuchera americana* 'Harry Hay'

Fig. 7 *Argyranthemum* 'Jamaica Primrose'Fig. 8 *Daphne bholua* 'Jacqueline Postill'Fig. 9 *Osteospermum* 'Cannington Roy'

be moved from the patio garden. That needs some redesigning and some physical work, to which I shall look forward.

Plants that were flowering through the autumn and until the end of December 1994 included quite a few salvias, mainly non-hardy ones; the winters back then were much kinder than of late. However, *Salvia involucrata* 'Bethellii' AGM, and *S. greggii* 'Stormy Pink' were still flowering this January, as was *S. x jamensis* 'Hot Lips' – a descriptive name, especially as during colder weather the “lips” were white or very pale pink! I can't think what made me buy this plant, I probably did not see its name until afterwards, but its bright scarlet flowers perfectly match the plants next to it – *Fascicularia pitcairniifolia* when the leaves of its flowering rosettes turn scarlet in August, and the berries of the *Cotoneaster horizontalis* growing in the wall above.

I shall be searching the Plant Sales for the salvias recommended by Steve Hickman [*The Hardy Plant*, Vol. 32 No. 1]. Among those he describes as acceptably hardy is *Salvia nemorosa*; its cultivar 'Amethyst' AGM is one of the shorter and prolific types, purple flower spikes maintaining their colour even after the individual florets have dropped, flowering at least through to October and with a little bit of luck, who knows?

*Osteospermum* 'Cannington Roy' (fig. 9) never seems to stop flowering and has been doing so in the same place on the patio for over 20 years. But I no longer have *O.* 'Tresco Peggy' (now with a new name 'Nairobi Purple'), which is sad because I had mine from Peter Clough when he

was head gardener on Tresco and we used to holiday on the island twice each year. I've put *O. jucundum* 'Langtrees' AGM on my wants list. It's a bushy plant with purplish pink rays and a yellow disc. Langtrees garden at Croyde, not far from here, belonged to the late Dr Rodgerson who bred or selected many worthwhile plants. The garden is open under the NGS.

On a much bigger scale, the large shrub *Ageratina ligustrina* consistently flowers from June through to the end of January regardless of the weather, admittedly not with such an abundance of floral sprays as in July. On warm days, there is the added bonus of its sweet-spicy perfume. It is part of the shelter belt at the sea end of the garden so it survives the full force of westerly gales.

Another reminder of Tresco is *Sparrmannia africana* AGM, flowering on the patio. Its parent grew so luxuriantly on the edge of the Abbey Drive that it was cut back with a strimmer, providing an abundant source of cuttings! Hence my plant and its descendants.

### **Movement and Presence**

However, it is the non-flowering plants which are so rewarding for their structure and movement in the depth of winter.

The prima donna in my garden is *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Silberfeder', the slightest breeze causing gentle movement, and when the gales flatten it to the horizontal it instantly recovers as soon as the wind abates. I have no intention of replacing it, a JCB



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Fig. 10 *Cyperus involucratus* – the umbrella sedge, *Carex elata* 'Aurea' & *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Silberfeder' on sunnier summer days

would be needed; trying to dig up a chunk to give to admirers amongst garden visitors is almost impossible it is so tough. However, if I were planting a miscanthus now it would probably be *M. s.* 'Ferner Osten' AGM which has rich red-and-white-tipped plumes opening in August, maturing through pink tones to silver beige and whose foliage goes bright orange in the autumn. *M. s.* 'Kleine Silberspinne' sounds equally lovely for the smaller garden.

I wouldn't be without *Stipa gigantea* AGM but its plumes don't quite last to the end of December. For colour and presence, *Hackenochloa macra* 'Alboarea' AGM pleases throughout the year, in sun or shade. *Pennisetum x advena* 'Rubrum' AGM has deep red foliage from May through the autumn, plus arching reddish plumes from September, but it needs to be taken into protective custody before the frosts. That I'm quite willing to do, so it's another plant I'm looking forward to acquiring.

*Carex elata* 'Aurea' AGM (fig. 10), Bowles' golden sedge, has grown happily for many years in the shallow end of the lawn pond – so called because years ago it was in the lawn before the grass was turned into turf which in due course became precious potting loam. Herbaceous treasures now surround the water. That great plantsman E A Bowles spotted a shoot of vivid gold on a normal green *Carex elata* and it has brightened up countless gardens, gleaming throughout the year. I also grow it in a shady border where it doesn't dry out very often.

The hardy banana, *Musa basjoo* AGM (fig. 11), gives architectural height; it's also a reminder of warm summer days spent watching the wasps pollinate its inconspicuous flowers which almost immediately turn into mini-bananas in recognisable bunches! They're a talking point for garden visitors, as is the rapidly expanding grove, kept just within tolerance by the fact that each plant is monocarpic and, having done its thing, dies and is felled with a small chain saw. The huge leaves of this largest of the herbaceous plants, although tattered by the storms, remain presentable until hard frosts.

Growing near it is *Melianthus major* AGM, which Graham Stuart Thomas describes as being 'probably the most beautiful foliage of any plant that can be grown out of doors in these islands'. Now there's a recommendation for you!



Fig. 11 *Musa basjoo* & *Melianthus major*

We gardeners, I think, owe a dept of gratitude to the RHS for their trials and awards system giving us an easily accessible way of finding plants which are excellent and garden worthy.

### Close encounters

Also a prominent feature from the sitting room window is the small tree, *Styrax japonicus*, given to me as a rooted cutting way back in 1976 by my gardening friend Ray Steele, one



Fig. 12 Lichen – an intimate plant association

of his many generous gifts over the years. In late June it smothers itself in little white pendulous flowers, like snowdrops, often missed by visitors until some of the fallen flowers form a white carpet beneath the tree. G S T says of it ‘plant while one is young so that it can grow over one’s head.’ How wise, and thank you Ray.

That little tree has an added attraction when leafless. It reveals branches covered in many varieties of crustaceous, foliose and fruticose lichens (fig. 12). Intriguingly beautiful to look at closely, ideally under a hand lens, they are an indicator of the good quality of our Atlantic air; because lichens are incredibly efficient at absorbing trace elements from the atmosphere, any pollutants have disastrous consequences for the lichen. Each different ‘species’ of lichen consists of two organisms, a specific algae and a specific fungus forming a close symbiotic association: the algae supplies the carbohydrates through photosynthesis, while the fungus usually provides the outer layer and protects the algae from drought, intense light and extremes of temperature, and absorbs rain and the nutrients it contains. Lichens have the ability to produce unique acids which, over the millennia, have dissolved rocks to produce soil. We owe them our gratitude.

Lichens are an example of plant associations of a very intimate sort. In our gardens are many examples of the wider kind and it is those that provide so much pleasure. Sitting indoors on those wet and windy winter days, the thoughts of last year’s successful plant combinations and the many examples of ‘could do better’ have spurred me on to look forward to active gardening, plant acquisitions and renewing associations with gardening friends. 🍄

**Heather Booker** gardens in a little paradise called Lee and welcomes garden visitors under the NGS Scheme. She is looking forward to hours of enjoyment planting & cossetting all her treasured plants, new and old friends.