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## The learning curve

**Val Bourne** finds that many of the best 'white' flowers in summer light are not pure white but have subtle hints or patterns of colour.

Fig. 1 *Verbascum chaixii* 'Album'.

People imagine that garden writing is a sociable, pleasant affair. In fact it's rather solitary and a little like being a chameleon, changing from day to day to another shade of opinion. Sometimes it feels rather like shedding your skin and exposing another layer, and on some days the process is tougher than most. The other day I had wrestled more than usual and fell into the garden, at five in the evening, to a magically soft light. Instead of having a quiet cup of tea as I'd planned, I grabbed the camera and took some pictures until the light changed again, back to its normal harsh glare.

Spring Cottage, high in the Cotswolds, actually does have sheep safely grazing in the fields beyond. In fact I just caught one standing on an ancient anthill and pruning my 'Goldfinch' rambling rose over the low stone wall. You may imagine rolling hills and valleys like those around Stroud, but I am on a plateau and can see level ground for miles in an area colloquially known as the empty quarter because it's mostly large estates. The modest garden faces south, and the one thing we're not short of is light from every angle. It's not a soft valley light either: it's an unforgiving glare most of the time. It washes out

colour, especially when the days are at their longest.

Thankfully our island country enjoys seasons and, although the weather patterns have changed since I was a child, our position in the Northern hemisphere doesn't alter, so day length and seasonal light persist. The angle of the sun shifts from high to low as effectively as a kaleidoscope being slowly turned. We notice the light every day here, and we do well with South African plants such as crocosmias and agapanthus, plants used to exposure. New Zealanders such as corokias will flower in such conditions, growing to produce angular bushes. These twists and turns are designed to defy grazers. Perhaps the roses along the stone wall should be replaced by a few wiry corokias that might be less tempting to sheep.



Fig. 2 *Malva moschata* f. *alba*.

Light affects colour, which is why so many artists head for the sea, where the light reflected off the watery expanse delivers a soft, almost milky haze that's fairly constant in tone. Here in the heart of England, light is much more volatile: it can change from leaden to bright in moments. Summer light here is like a naked 100 watt bulb, for those of you who can remember the era before low-energy light bulbs dimmed our world.

In stark summer light, white flowers can look icy.

The best 'whites' in my garden aren't really white at all, their colour tempered by tints or markings.

In my experience, white is the trickiest colour in summer light, often taking on a glacial effect. I haven't got yew

hedges to provide a rich background, as at Sissinghurst. It's not just me either. The one rose that the late Peter Beales and I had real reservations about (and found hard to place) was 'Madame Hardy'. We often discussed roses in quieter lulls on trips to Japan, and I miss him greatly. 'Madame Hardy', a damask, has a green button eye and a pure-white dress-shirt look that on languid summer days jars in every respect. The great rosarian Dean Hole liked this rose but opined that it's "green-eyed like jealousy". Graham Stuart Thomas thought it "an additional charm", proving how different we gardeners are.

It's far better to go for a soft, clotted-cream alternative like the hybrid musk rose 'Penelope', or one with a touch of pink in the bud and rhubarb stems, which is why 'Iceberg' has remained popular – although it's never grown well for me! The flowers are pale and very 'English rose' and look white without being icy. Admittedly, white comes into its own at night when light levels fall. Many white blooms attract moths rather than bees, and a white flower on a cool day stays cool, because the colour white absorbs little heat. Given that bees like to fly to warm flowers where nectar flows freely, the very act of being pure white and as cool as a cucumber must mean that by the end of the day there's

nectar still to spare. Or perhaps they only switch it on in the evenings?

White petals present another problem to the gardener. They have less pigment and more air in their petals, so all-white flowers tend to brown badly as they fade. Hot sun crisps them up too; they need careful placing, away from full sun. Even then they are difficult to photograph and nearly always come out over-exposed. So on the day I went out with my camera, on that soft-lit late afternoon, I captured some of the whites I grow. Looking at the pictures a few hours later I discovered that my 'whites' weren't all white at all: they had pink tones, or veins, or some distinguishing marks. So they avoided glacial overkill, and captured extra heat to attract the pollinators.

*Verbascum chaixii* 'Album' (fig. 1), a truly perennial verbascum, has proved long lived and hardy for me, unlike



Fig. 3 *Gaura lindheimeri*.

many of the verbasiums I have bought, planted and lost. Known as the Nettle-leaved Mullein, it has a huge natural range stretching from Southern Central Europe into Russia – so hardiness is never a problem. It comes after the first flush of verbasiums, overlapping with roses, producing lots of narrow tapers at knee height or less; the grey-green foliage seems less loved by the mullein moth too. The small, white, five-petalled flowers, supported on grass-green sturdy stems, open spasmodically so there are always buds to follow. Each flower has furry violet filaments. The botanist in the family tells me hairy filaments are a verbasicum trait. These filaments, like the antennae of some exotic moth, give the flower a darker centre, capturing heat and encouraging nectar flow. They're topped by orange-yellow stamens, so it has two colours you can tap into. You could use this with the sedate-orange *Geum* 'Totally Tangerine', or mix it with purple-toned penstemons, or grow it with dark roses. It's a great plant, often used by garden designer Arne Maynard in his designs. I'm equally fond of the May-flowering self-seeder *Verbascum phoeniceum* 'Violetta', although this produces only one willowy purple wand per rosette, and

prefers a bit of shade.

The bees were all over my *Malva moschata* f. *alba* (fig. 2), the white musk mallow. This has a pale-pink middle and pink veins and all my garden visitors love it and collect seeds, despite my telling them it's a thug in feminine guise. In 1999 Cambridge Botanic Garden studied bees and has since published a paper entitled *Flowers, Nectar and Insect Visits: Evaluating British Plant Species for Pollinator-friendly Gardens*, by Livio Comba, Sarah A. Corbett Lynn Hunt and Ben Warren. They found the musk mallow to be the top bee flower of the ten they studied, and discovered that the nectar rush came at lunchtime and was particularly attractive to honey bees. Those pale veins, seen in infra-red by bees, lead to the pink middle which is so useful to gardeners for marrying up with pinks but also providing that warmer centre. *Gaura lindheimeri* (fig. 3) has the same hint of pink in bud, sepal and pedicel, so it avoids being glacial. It's easily raised from seed and will flower until November.

I also grow white echinaceas (fig. 4), which like my cold garden and can be placed easily. The flowers emerge from coronet-shaped buds, so much so that I almost want the buds to last forever. They emerge the colour of

lime cordial and whiten up, with golden middles that are alive with bees and butterflies in August and age to tan-brown. However I find I need to raise my echinaceas from seed using strains such as 'Magnus', 'White Swan' or 'Pink Parasol'. I can't keep the named ones I buy and plant in late July, and I've lost some pricey offerings including the double 'Southern Belle'. More a Chinese aster than *Echinacea*, it's micro-propagated and has followed 'Vintage Wine' and 'Fatal Attraction' to the compost heap in the sky. Raising them from seed provides variability of height and flower size, making them look more natural. The whites mingle amongst *Sedum* 'Purple Emperor', one of the contenders for my desert island list of five. Just like the bees, I like some colour with my whites. 🐝



Fig. 4 Like sparkling lemonade – a white echinacea.

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