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## Whose garden is it anyway?

**Alex Pankhurst** accuses wayward plants of doing their own thing.

Fig. 1 The small front garden is designed to be 'cottagey' with an assortment of plants, randomly flowering.

Do plants have personalities and minds of their own? You bet.

For years my garden has been inhabited in a desultory way by an antirrhinum with darkish leaves and deep red flowers. Can't say I remember acquiring it as a plant or seed, but it's clearly happy. Only in the places it chooses though. Nowhere else. 'Right place, right plant' is the gardener's mantra, and antirrhinums often grow in walls, as aptly named wallflowers do, in other words they like really hot, dry places. My north Essex patch with poor soil and low rainfall should suit them perfectly. And the small front garden is one of its hottest, driest areas, intended to be floriferous, like a Persian carpet, from March through to late summer (fig. 1). But it could do with a boost of vibrant red as the months

progress and early things go over. So I've scattered seed of this antirrhinum liberally, and young plants of it have been carefully planted there. To no avail. They haven't the slightest intention of obliging, preferring to grow where they're not wanted, in the middle of paths or poking up from underneath a bench (fig. 2). They might as well be sticking two fingers up.

For late summer interest it would be good to have hyssop (fig. 3) in the front garden too, and I've planted the blue, pink and the white-flowered forms. They make themselves at home elsewhere, seeding into pots and bullying the legitimate inhabitants, or taking ownership of a patio where they're not meant to be. Clearly they like the conditions on offer. Not when I plant them though. They don't rebel to the extent of

dying, the wretched things just fail to flourish, as if in a huff.

Part of the pleasure of gardening is getting to know plants, learning where they come from and understanding their needs. Is it too farfetched to wonder if they can be wayward too? I smiled wryly on hearing that *Lysimachia atropurpurea* was all the rage at Chelsea this year. Now that's a temperamental plant if ever there was one. Have you tried growing it? You buy this Balkan wild flower from a nursery, and that first year it bears a great show of extraordinary curved spikes of deep maroon flowers, to the admiration of visitors. They, the flowers not the visitors, then go to seed, lots of it, accompanied by slight misgiving on your part. It's a *lysimachia* for heavens sake, cousin of the irrepressible *L. punctata*, which has resisted



Fig. 2 Deep red antirrhinums would spice up the front garden, but they grow only where they please.

eviction from my garden for nearly forty years. And bullyboy *L. clethroides* is another relative. So a spread of seedlings is expected, to replace the shortlived parent. Only they don't appear. Nothing. And seed sown in a pot also declines to germinate. Well that's my experience.



Fig. 4 After two years, apparently docile white Rosebay Willowherb started its takeover bid.

Goodness knows how the nursery trade manages to produce plants. But this summer, fully three years after, in disgust, I'd given up replacing *Lysimachia atropurpurea*, a lone plant has appeared. In the middle of a creeping gypsophila, where it's not wanted, of course. A show of 'character', or is it being bloody-minded?

Then there are plants reckoning to get the better of you in other ways. The white form of our native Rosebay Willowherb, now called *Chamaenerion angustifolium* 'Album', seduced me as soon as I saw it in a big herbaceous border at a stately home (fig.4). A drift of elegant spikes in July, the picture of innocence and beauty it was, and I lost no time in acquiring this lovely thing, taking care to buy the sterile form. Wouldn't want it seeding all over the garden. For a couple of years it maintained the façade of



Fig. 3 Hyssop self seeds freely, but fails to thrive when I plant it.

guileless charm and then runners began appearing from deep underground, fully six feet from the plant. The charm offensive had worked, its invasion plan now well established. I'd been growing a con artist.

*Bupleurum falcatum* (fig.5) played the same trick, although with different means. I grow several bupleurums and am fond of the family. They all have flowers in various shades of green, a welcome, unusual and soothing colour. *B. longifolium* is a special friend, a perennial with no bad habits and long-lasting bronzy green flowers. Its relation, *B. falcatum*, would surely be a welcome addition to the Green Bed. It was too. I admired the waist-high, yellow green umbellifers swaying elegantly in the breeze, and seeding gently for the first couple of years. Then, after trust had been established, the bupleurum

began its takeover, with seedlings appearing irrepressibly all around. I'd been had. Again. Deceitful thing's now been banished to a strip of barren soil between the pavement and garden perimeter wall – where it's currently putting on the innocent act again. "Dreadful seeder? Who? Me?"

But for sheer eccentricity I give you *Haberlea rhodopensis*, which I admired in an alpinist's garden twenty-five years ago, resulting in his kindly giving me a bit. Books say this Bulgarian native likes damp, shady soil. Well sorry, but you won't find that anywhere in my garden. So I planted it against a north-facing raised bed, where the poor thing could at least get its roots under the brickwork. Surprisingly it's not only survived all that time, but has spread into a solid cushion, eighteen inches across, which in late spring produces a few mauve flowers on finger-

length stalks. But gravelly soil dries quickly and the overhead summer sun is merciless, so after a while the haberlea dies. Or appears to. "Goodbye cruel world. I'm a goner!" it wails, green leaves shrivelling, until the whole cushion becomes just a crunchy brown mess. RIP.

Eventually, though, rain falls – proper soaking stuff. Whereupon, "Only kidding", the haberlea announces cheerfully, and somehow the shrivelled leaves come good (figs 6 & 7). Is that weird, or what.

Unsurprisingly sempervivums are in their element in my parched patch, and very useful they are too. They hide a copper pipe running beneath the French windows, and outside the greenhouse door a big solid cushion of one, besides being attractive, is a weed preventative. Wanting the same for the back of a step where all sorts of seedlings



Fig. 5 *Bupleurum falcatum* seeds all over the place.

like to establish themselves, I pulled off some of the sempervivum rosettes and inserted their roots into the crack with an encouraging "Do the same again please."

The sempervivum was having none of it. Like a defiant teenager, it decided to do what it damn well liked, rather than what was asked of it. The step remains a destiny of choice for weeds and other plants, and I discovered the



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Figs. 6 & 7 *Haberlea rhodopensis* appears to die, then revives after heavy rain.

sempervivum has colonized nearby roof tiles instead (fig. 8). Perhaps birds took the rosettes up there. Or maybe this particular sempervivum simply had a sense of history, and was obeying the Emperor Charlemagne's decree that house leeks should be grown on roofs to protect against lightning.

Most likely it was just doing what it pleased, instead of what I wanted. Plants couldn't care less who nominally owns the garden. They know it really belongs to them. 🌱

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Fig. 8 Sempervivums obeying the Emperor Charlemagne, protecting the roof against lightning.

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Fig. 9 Plants that do their own thing contribute to a patchwork-quilt effect.

**Alex Pankhurst** has battled with her 'parched patch' for 38 years. She is the author of three books.