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Paeonia mlokosewitschii wins many gardeners' hearts. Tony Bay's portrait won first prize in Category One of the 2014 Photographic Competition.

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From the editor

Fig. 3 *Holboellia brachyandra*, a Crûg Farm introduction from North Vietnam, thriving in Roy’s Hampshire garden.
My 2014 new year got off to a good start with the completion of my final descriptions for the new edition of *The Hillier Manual of Trees and Shrubs*. Together with the staff of the Botany Department at RHS Wisley, John Hillier and I had spent a great deal of time in revising and updating the previous 2002 edition, and we were both thrilled and relieved to see its publication in April. It includes some 1500 additional plants and, together with a new book by Jean Hillier, *Hillier, the People, the Plants, the Passion*, which tells the story of the Hillier Nursery dynasty, it proved the perfect celebration of the company’s 150th anniversary.

One of the plants not in the new *Manual* is *Mahonia subimbricata*, a Chinese species which is yet to come into general cultivation. In a container I have a small plant, grown from a cutting, which provided a charming display of young growth in March. At the same time, in my garden, another *Mahonia* I have named ‘Silver Back’ was providing an impressive display of yellow flower-spikes which proved unaffected by several nights of below zero temperatures. This ultimately large shrub is a seedling which has inherited its parent’s bold foliage with white undersides. There are many new mahonias entering cultivation just now, especially selections of the hybrid *M. x savilliana*, some of which are showing good garden potential.
May is perhaps the busiest and most exciting month in the gardening calendar, so I will limit myself to just two plant highlights which brought me great pleasure. The first involved a visit to Wisley and the sight of a huge plant of the tree peony *Paonia* (Gansu Group) ‘Highdown’ (figs 1 & 2) in full flower. It can be found in one of the long borders outside the walled garden. I can still remember the famous original of this cultivar at Highdown in Sussex, where for most of its life it was believed to be ‘Joseph Rock’ until careful research decided otherwise. Whatever its history, it is one of those plants whose beauty transcends the rules of taxonomy and nomenclature to bring a pleasure close to perfection into our lives.

A few days later, after watching for several weeks the buds developing, I was over the moon to see the *Holboellia brachyandra* (fig. 3) on the west wall of our house produce a sumptuous display of faintly pink-washed-white, lightly scented blooms. Male and female flowers are borne from the leaf axils in separate drooping clusters, the males being the larger. Both have deep-red stalks. Sadly, the females failed to produce their characteristic large, sausage-shaped seedpods.

I so enjoyed attending the Society’s AGM at Pershore in March, and was grateful to Jennifer Harmer for offering to do the driving as I was recovering from a viral infection. It was great to see so many familiar faces and to meet new ones too, while enjoying the bonus of two excellent talks. It also gave me the opportunity of thanking out retiring Chairman, Vivienne McGhee, and welcoming our new one, John Dilks. Given the difficulties associated with recruiting members to take on Committee roles and responsibilities, and my experience covers many societies over the years, I cannot praise highly enough those who do so for the HPS and help us, the majority, to enjoy the benefits of membership; and this of course includes the Group committees.
This rare twining evergreen climber is one of Crûg Farm’s introductions collected at around 2000m from North Vietnam’s highest mountain, Fansipan (3,143m), the origin of a goodly number of exciting new introductions in recent years. In three winters my plant has not suffered any damage from occasional temperatures below freezing. Long may it continue.

Another highlight of my year was the two-week trip in early June I spent with my friend Jim Gardiner accompanying a group of 26 members of the RHS visiting some of the famous botanical locations in China’s Sichuan and Yunnan provinces. This was my eleventh visit to the Mother of Gardens, as the great plant explorer E H Wilson once referred to it, and it produced lots of surprises, especially in plants seen. One of the most interesting was *Kingdonia uniflora* (fig.4), a curious and primitive carpeting perennial of the buttercup family *Ranunculaceae*, with tiny long-stalked, single green flowers and rounded, sharply segmented leaves. It is a rare Chinese endemic, named after the plant hunter Frank Kingdon Ward. We found it first on Emei Shan (Mt Omei) growing on shady slopes with *Ichthyoselmis macrantha* (who thinks up these names?) (fig. 5)
better known as Dicentra macrantha, Arisaema wilsonii (fig. 6) and Anemone davidii. Several days later, above the picturesque Nuorilang Falls in Jiuzhaigou National Reserve were Paeonia veitchii, Triosteum pinnatifidum (fig. 7) and Cardamine tangutorum (fig. 8) growing with Caltha palustris, plus a welter of familiar garden shrubs including Deutzia longifolia, Philadelphus subcanus, Lonicera syringantha, Rosa roxburghii and Viburnum betulifolium.

Our trip ended with two full days in the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain of north-west Yunnan, where Oxyria sinensis, Daphne calicola, Primula forrestii, several Roscoea species and a host of shrubs and trees too numerous to relate here kept our cameras and notebooks busy. All this in stunning landscapes of mountains, forests, lakes and waterfalls.

Following a family visit to the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow in late July, we paid a visit to Edinburgh’s Royal Botanic Garden satellite garden Benmore, in Argyll. Situated on a mountainside, it holds one of the best collections I know of wild-origin rhododendrons and conifers and much else. More recent collections have been planted on a geographical basis with Japan, China, Chile and the Himalaya particularly well represented. There were plenty of perennials to enjoy and admire including on the day an impressive display of Rodgersia aesculifolia var. henrici (fig. 9) which I suspect originated from the Cangshan, a range of mountains above Dali in Yunnan province.
Figs 11 & 12 Eucryphia × nymansensis ‘Nyman’s Silver’, worth considering for a sheltered, lime-free garden.

While driving around southern Scotland I was interested to see how widespread Lysimachia punctata has become naturalised on roadsides, often creating long swathes of golden-yellow flower spikes. My wife and I finished our tour with a visit to Glendoick Gardens, near Perth, to see our old friends Peter and Patricia Cox. Peter and I were members of the first Sino-British Expedition to the Cangshan, China, in May 1981, and I was thrilled to see so many of the plants grown from the seed we’d collected then still thriving, especially the rhododendrons. It was an unnamed silver linden, Tilia sp., however, which most caught my eye, a 10m tree with a compact crown growing in a paddock from seed Peter had introduced from Sichuan in western China. Its silver-backed leaves and conspicuous creamy flower clusters combined to make this a most notable specimen and I was even more excited when, having taken samples for pressing which I later sent to Professor Donald Piggott, an authority on Tilia, it was identified as Tilia callidonta (fig. 10), a very rare species as yet little known in western cultivation. I am hopeful that, if attempts to propagate it by grafting are successful, this striking tree will yet become available to those tree enthusiasts with available space to accommodate its eventual size of 20m or more. I can hardly wait.

A tree of a very different kind attracted my attention in August when visiting the garden of my friends Michael and Lena Hickson in Devon. Michael is well known to HPS members and gardeners, particularly in the south west, having until his retirement, been long-time Head Gardener at Knightshayes near Tiverton. The tree in question, thriving in a border below their house, is Eucryphia × nymansensis ‘Nyman’s Silver’ (figs 11 & 12), a creamy-white-variegated form of the well known hybrid which arose as a branch sport on a specimen of the typical tree at Nymans Garden in Sussex. It is columnar in habit and appears just as free-flowering as its parent. For those able to provide a sheltered site and a moisture-retentive, preferably lime-free soil this is an evergreen well worth considering. I have a specimen, yet to flower, in my own garden with its head in the sun and its roots in the shade and me with hope in my heart.
Hope is what we gardeners all need to have when we venture into pastures new, especially when it comes to trialling new plants. Two years ago I was given young plants from seed of a Giant Sow Thistle, *Sonchus fruticosus*, from Madeira, where it grows wild in the mountains and is cultivated in several well known gardens there. A woody-based, multi-stemmed perennial or subshrub, it can reach as much as 4m but is generally half this size in gardens and produces an impressive mound of big, boldly-lobed, thin-textured pale-green foliage. The branched heads of dandelion-like flowers carried above the leaves in summer add little to its attraction. I planted two seedlings close to the house in sheltered borders which this year made an impressive sight, commented on by visitors. But the first frost of winter caught them and me by surprise and reduced the top growth to a sad, crumpled mush which, following a light pruning, remains as a reminder of failed expectations. Friends have told me that it will, likely as not, break anew from the base in spring, and given that the roots are well established in a dry, sheltered pocket I must hope they are right.

I was fortunate enough to twice visit Ireland, where I have made a good number of gardening friends over the years since my first visit in the 1960s. Indeed, some of my most exciting and memorable experiences have been spent in Ireland’s gardens and in her wild places and this year was no exception. An invitation to view the spectacular tree-fern grove at Kells Bay House on the Kerry coast in September provided an excuse for the owner, Billy Alexander, to organise a day’s symposium attended by some 70 of Ireland’s gardeners and plantsmen. To say a good time was had by all would be putting it mildly, and I went on my way my head buzzing with names and a boot full of plants.

Of the other exciting gardens visited on this trip, all in the South West, I was especially pleased to revisit Fota Arboretum and Gardens near Cork, where Head Gardener David O’Regan showed me round. I always feel privileged and energised when in the company of a plant enthusiast and David did not disappoint. When I told him of a previous visit in 1975 he immediately led me into the Arboretum, determined to show me that the trees I had admired almost 40 years before were still alive and well, and most of them were. His pleasure in showing them to me and his passion in talking about them were heart warming, and so it continued to the end when he took me into a large walled garden which supported an impressive range of climbers, all expertly trained. One of these was the evergreen *Clematis uncinata* (fig. 13), grown from seed introduced from China by another talented and knowledgeable Irish plantsman, Seamus O’Brien, who recently authored an outstanding account of Ireland’s greatest dendrologist and plant explorer, Augustine Henry.
The evergreen clematis covered a sizeable piece of the tall wall, its branches tumbling forward wreathed in frothy panicles of small, creamy-white flowers with a strong, pleasing fragrance. It is not the hardiest of species, but where a warm sheltered position and sufficient space can be provided then *C. uncinata* is certainly worth the challenge.

It was in January 2012 that Sally-Ann Turner sent me a copy of the HPS Essex Group Newsletter, drawing my attention to an article by Irene Feesey, a member aged 98 who was living with her daughter, Rosie Boser, in Northamptonshire. I so enjoyed reading it that I wrote to congratulate her, and thus began an exchange of letters and notes – subject: plants. In late October, now aged 101, Irene came with Rosie to see me in Hampshire. It was a cool but sunny day and given Irene’s catholic tastes in plants we spent an enjoyable day touring first the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens followed by a brief visit to my garden where we had tea. Both ladies had their own notebooks which they used almost non-stop, recording names and impressions of almost everything we saw. Of course Irene had her favourites of which *Miscanthus nepalensis* (fig.14) and *Salvia confertiflora* were just two. Both flourish in the recently planted Centenary Border. Then there was the white-spiked *Clethra tomentosa* ‘Cottondale’ and the orange-yellow-fruited *Euonymus myrianthus*, not forgetting the curious *Ligustrum japonicum* ‘Rotundifolium’. To watch Irene enjoying her plants and so curious to know more reminded me once again how lucky we are to be so moved and motivated by such simple pleasures.
George was typical of the kind of HPS members who give of themselves while also encouraging others to give of themselves. George was what we might call a building block of the Society.

Membership soon led George, with his wife Cecilia, to become active contributors to the workings of the Society. They helped with the Seed Distribution Scheme when they lived in Oxford, and on their move to Lincolnshire they continued to help, to such an extent that the Scheme was soon being almost entirely run by members in the county – a typical example of the Parkers’ involvement encouraging others to do much more than they thought they wanted to do, or were capable of doing.

By this time, George and Cecilia had also encouraged a geographically scattered membership to come together to form a Lincolnshire Group. It quickly grew and became one of the largest in the country. It is no exaggeration to say that by forming this group and imbuing it with their friendly, constructive enthusiasm, they influenced hundreds of peoples’ lives for the better.

George served as secretary of the Group for many years, as well as editing its excellent newsletter.

At national level, George served on the Executive Committee (precursor of the Trustees), where he was always an active contributor, blending forthright opinions with good humour. He made what was to become an enormous contribution to the Society when he started the Slide Library, and the original few shoe boxes of slides soon became a library of thousands of images. As Slide Librarian, he not only catalogued the images but also helped those who wanted to borrow slides for talks to put together a good selection – a time-consuming service he willingly offered.

His ability to write and edit led to his becoming for several years the Editor of the HPS series of Booklets and an active member of the Publications Subcommittee. Developing from this, he sought support to start a publication that blended some of the best writing from Group newsletters. So, in the spring of 1998, *Cornucopia* was born, a publication that speaks directly to members from others’ experience as keen gardeners and members of the Society. Although he handed on the editorship of this publication some years ago, this, along with the Booklets and the Slide Library, live on as a tribute to this very likeable man and exemplary Hardy Planter.
Some plants, undeniably, have star quality: their shape, size, habit, or more often their colour just grab our attention and will not let go. That, of course, is why we fell for them in the first place: we are badly smitten and buy them anyway, despite our better judgement, and often without the least idea of where they will go and what role they will play in our own garden arena. Stars do not take kindly to being upstaged and we find this out pretty quickly. If, like me, you’re perennially weak-willed in the plant-buying department, you’ll have this problem quite often; but you will, by now, have one or two answers up your sleeve.

Then there is that other group of gardeners, apparently made of sterner stuff, who seem to have the word ‘No’ imprinted throughout, like Blackpool rock – as a server on a plant stall I hear this word all the time. If the plant is orange or magenta, or even red, the response is often “No thanks”, sometimes uttered with a shudder; if the plant is anything bigger than three feet tall the retort will be “Too big for my garden”. Simple exhortations, even downright lies, won’t help at this juncture, but what follows just might.

Take agapanthus (fig.1), probably everybody’s favourite and reasonably accommodating given sun, good drainage and a blanket of winter mulch – remember that there’s a National Collection in sunny Yorkshire. This is a plant of star potential but it’s so often relegated to the chorus line by being swamped in a mass of other planting – this is not so much ‘a star is born’ as ‘a star is buried’. Half its appeal is its habit and the glorious, rounded umbels of flower, so it needs to be isolated in some way to be seen to best effect. Helen Dillon has managed to achieve this, here by simply slipping a pot of agapanthus into the border ‘as is’.

Fig. 1 Agapanthus, still in their pots, waving about at eye-level in Helen Dillon’s garden in Dublin, delight with form as well as colour.

**Stars, showgirls and the chorus line**

**Janet Sleep**

sets the stage for show-stopping plants.
Her strategy instantly raises the agapanthus heads above the colour clamour of the surrounding phlox and alstroemeria, which allows us to appreciate its form as well as its colour. This method has the added merit of being entirely flexible, enabling you to plug late-summer gaps with ease, and as your pots can be safely undercover out of season it also saves you from worrying about cold springs and late frosts. Of course it is cheating, and you will have to water, but how many headaches are solved in one go.

My friend Linda has a more permanent and quite brilliant solution. She has a raised, sitting-out terrace paved with purple slate. The supporting structure (about 18” high) consists of a narrow raised bed, with lavender and agapanthus revelling in the enhanced drainage and the extra space and light. The plants wave airily over the lower beds containing spring stuff offering no competition. Splendid.

Great Dixter is awash with magnificent plants but none better than this *Dierama pulcherrimum* (fig. 2), which is given the full star treatment in the sunken garden. A corner position adjacent to paving allows the plant to exhibit its full potential: those arching wands weighed down by pale chains of bells are simply exquisite. It is generally tall enough to emerge well from any low planting, but a little bit of stage-management, as here, works wonders. The added advantage of this location is that the site provides shelter from flattening winds, and accumulates moisture which the plant wants plenty of in summer when it makes its push to flower. It can also get its feet under thick paving stones, which keep its feet both cool and protected. Helen Dillon will tell you that this is a plant that does not appreciate too much close competition: I can confirm this to my cost.

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**Fig. 2**  *Dierama pulcherrimum* in Great Dixter’s sunken garden. Its corner position over paving allows it to show off its elegant, arching habit. Dieramas are not for cramming.
If you lack a suitable corner or promontory for your dierama, you might try the plant in an open-based half-sized chimney pot. This would raise the plant above the crowd and the extra thickness of the pot would also protect the roots. It would need extra water in summer but should be a better bet in a soggy winter.

Another plant with a similar arching habit but with upturned sprays of flower is *Crocosmia* ‘Firebird’ (fig. 3), seen here flowering in Helen Dillon’s garden at the beginning of August. This plant merits its star status not only by virtue of the sheer elegance of its presentation but also for its stunning colour – orange verging on vermilion. It’s the natural separation of its flower spikes, allowing the eye to enjoy the colour hit without becoming swamped and fatigued, which makes the sharp contrast of adjacent colours acceptable.

I should prefer the neighbouring phlox to be either a warmer pink or a cooler mauve, but this is simply to carp. It does have shock value, but that is the point. ‘Firebird’ is, of course, an Alan Bloom, Bressingham introduction, so when I unwittingly brought corms back from Dublin to Norfolk it was a case of coals to Newcastle. More fool me.

![Fig. 3 Crocosmia ‘Firebird’ – an Alan Bloom introduction with brilliant colour and elegant habit. Give this one space to perform but partner it with magenta, purple, mauve or warm pink for maximum shock value.](image3)

![Fig. 4 Leontodon rigens (syn. Microseris ringens) in acid yellow backed by a warmer yellow crocosmia – try C. masoniorum ‘Rowallane Yellow’ – and Cotinus coggygria in one of its purple forms. Avoid ‘Grace’ which is too vigorous as you’d have to stool it each spring anyway to keep it to this height.](image4)
For those who are terrified of orange or its ilk, I recommend a visit to June Blake’s garden up in the Wicklow Mountains just south of Dublin (figs 4 & 5). If timed correctly (anywhere between mid-July to September will do the trick) you will be bowled head over heels by her big hot border. Every part of this garden is magical and it is by no means all hot, but you will be drawn to the hot stuff like a fly to amber. The garden is on a serious slope, so that big (and I do mean BIG) raised beds create the centrepiece. One is given over to hot in all its forms: you can walk all round it to admire every aspect, but this will take an age as you wallow in the utter pleasure of it. Yet this is no mere hotchpotch. Colours are cleverly graded, acid yellow to warmer amber yellow, to pale orange, to burnt orange, to dark reds and plum. While plum can be glum, as we all know, the light which bounces off the nearby yellows and the white granite chips around the bed as a whole creates stained-glass effects from every angle. This is a chorus line all right, but of the Busby Berkeley, glamorous kind. It cannot help but make you smile. Try it and see.

Using light to enhance your hot colour associations is undoubtedly a big help. This is where the standard south-facing border, backed by wall or hedge, where the light is always full on, just does not fit the bill. Much better, if you cannot manage an all-round border like June Blake, is to have a bed stretching north-south that at least can be side lit from mid-day and if it can be open to the west too, then the colour will just intensify as the sun sinks to the horizon. John Massey of Ashwood Nurseries has done this in his private garden near Wolverhampton: on his west-facing terrace (fig. 6), pots of vermilion begonia glow in the September sunshine alongside other tender, sun-loving plants such as Aeonium ‘Zwartkop’.

Fig. 5 More of June Blake’s garden south of Dublin, the first week in August. The lily is likely to be the easy and vigorous L. lancifolium in one of its better varieties such as L. l. var. fortunei; L. henryi could be used, although it’s rather paler in colour and a little earlier to flower.
The light filters through the begonia petals turning them to liquid fire, while it skitters off the dark, fleshy, aeonium leaves like the shine off a guardsman’s boot. Light is penetrating the green foliage all around, restoring that yellow-green vibrancy we associate with spring. Despite containing little hot colour, the whole tone of this scene is warm and inviting – just the place to sit out with your afternoon tea. The strong verticals of the stone pergola act as frames to each garden picture. Being inside the pergola is rather like being inside a 3D art gallery – all just so very clever.

To prevent your getting too over-excited (perhaps a few calming breaths are in order) I have switched to something cooler for Fig. 7 – another bit of Helen Dillon’s August border. The lythrum and the phlox contrast beautifully in form yet meld seamlessly in palest pink and rosy mauve, but the charm of this association is much increased by the sprinkling of red knautia and rusty alstroemeria. This is the equivalent of the classic interior designer’s ‘touch of red’, used to give the whole thing a bit of spark. It works every time. But the star in this show, surely the canna in the background, gets to win over the competition in the end. Your eye just cannot fail to be drawn by the simple presence of the plant, and in fact the eye is rather pleased to rest on these big green leaves before going back for more of the show in front. A bit like taking a draft of water (or wine if you must) in between spoonfuls of the sugary pudding we like so much. Helen cannot remember which phlox this one is, other than it is a very old variety, but *P. x arendsi* ‘Utopia’ might very well fit the bill.
by being always on the lookout for the next threat, and big could certainly mean that, if only because it might mean something lurking in the undergrowth. So the frisson of excitement that one gets when entering Great Dixter’s exotic garden (fig. 8), is entirely understandable. The place is filled with junior monsters, planted very close and, because of the narrow pathways, looming at you at every point: here are giant, broadleaved miscanthus, tree fern, catalpa, paulownia, tetrapanax, cordyline, eucalyptus, banana and bamboo, and layered under, through and over are climbers and creepers of multiple sorts along with Dixter’s trademark verbena and the like. This, of course, is not restful: rather, it is certain to get the pulse racing. Great Dixter as usual breaks every rule in the book and gets away with it triumphantly. These plants are all stars and might be expected to fight for your attention, the one with another, but not a bit of it: once up close and personal you become one of the cast, not just a member of the audience sitting passively by. Despite the fact that these are friendly giants in the main, you will not want to do too much sitting here.

If you too want the wow factor then here is the recipe: plant lots of big plants in a confined space – the bigger the leaf the better; create no vistas and have narrow paths; cram, underplant and overplant; stool and pollard each year and replant often; wrap and cosset until very late in the spring; don’t worry about hardiness, just replant when something fails; always go over the top. That should do it.

Janet Sleep gardens in deepest Norfolk and has always found that the garden is much the best place to be, whatever the weather.
As gardens get smaller they get shadier. All those walls and fences tend to reduce light levels – maybe imperceptibly, so that although the normal run of plants will not die immediately, they’ll not thrive either, taking perhaps five years to die. Filling your garden by trial and error will be a long, frustrating and expensive process. Or maybe you have a large garden but it’s on the north side of your house, or maybe there’s a large sycamore next door, half of whose canopy covers half of your garden so that even if you have a large garden much of it is shady.

Shade is not a problem. It’s an opportunity.

Lower light levels make gardens less busy and more restful. Shady gardens are more sheltered – warmer when it’s cool and cooler when it’s warm. Enclosure captures and keeps perfumes better too. Such restful, sheltered, scented and comfortable gardens cry out to be used, so install seating and put in uplighters.
Sit outside in the evenings as well as during the day. Go out in fur hats with cocoa in the winter.

Reckon on metre squares of planting for a small or average garden which means one small shrub or fifteen bulbs in a block. Fussy planting is never restful (although it can be colourful) and if you have a small garden it can look ridiculous. I have a customer with a minute shady garden with perhaps 15 enormous plants in it and it looks fabulous. I know of many gardens where small-scale planting merely draws attention to the walls and fences.

What to plant? It’s trite but true – pale or white flowers look really good in shade. If you are into bedding use white Busy Lizzies or white begonias. During the winter use the best modern hellebores. I’ve chosen *Helleborus × ericsmithii* ‘Winter Moonbeam’ (fig. 1) because it has the best summer foliage, so I can enjoy it all year. The white flowers look outward and mature pink. Both white and pink work well in shade. As shrubs, hydrangeas are good and forms of *H. paniculata* like ‘Phantom’ (fig. 2) or *H. arborescens* ‘Annabelle’ work really well.

You’ll need some colour as well. Phlox are usually grown in sunny borders but they’d much prefer your shady ones, and of course they provide both colour and perfume. I’d avoid the purples and blues because they are less visible in shade, and plump for pinks. There are dozens all making worthy garden plants. I also have a clump of what are generally called ‘tree lilies’ – a pink one, *Lilium* ‘Robina’ (fig. 3), which also scents the air. I spray it with systemic insecticide soon after it appears and I see the first lily beetle. Thereafter they’re no trouble.

Rooty areas under trees are good places to plant hardy cyclamen and with care you can organise continuous flowers. Start with *C. hederifolium* in late July followed by *C. coum* in January, and *C. repandum* in April: they have well-patterned deep-green leaves at times too. Such areas need height as well; this could be provided by *Choisya ternata*, or better still my favourite shrub, *Choisya × dewitteana* White Dazzler (fig. 4), or *Danae racemosa* with its shimmering foliage. *Kirengeshoma palmata* Koreana Group opens its pendent waxy primrose-yellow flowers in late August and September.
Although the yellow isn’t in the least brassy it’s confined to a splendid area of my tiny garden I dub ‘The Yellow Patch’ which brings sun into the shade especially in winter.

Mix in pale colours to lighten the shade but the use of silver or grey foliage doesn’t work. In nature silvers and greys are defence against too much light, and not only would they fail in a shady garden, they wouldn’t look right either. On the other hand the variegated foliage in say *Euonymus fortunei* can be key.

Use cold whites like *E. f.* ‘Emerald Gaiety’ and ‘Silver Queen’, or simply *E. f.* var. *radicans* ‘Variegatus’, which is a warmer golden yellow. Try non-climbing tree ivies like *Hedera helix* ‘Cavendishii Latina’ too, but don’t use any ivy where the leaves go green in shadow. If the shade is very dark and the conditions dry, *Fatsia japonica ‘Spider’s Web’* (fig. 5) will diminish the gloom, especially in late November and December when its ghostly white flowers bloom on white stems. If it develops hints of yellow you are growing it in too light a place.

Finally, there’s a wonderful pale fern that will contrast well with anything around it with distinctive shape and colour – *Athyrium otophorum var. okanum*, the Eared Lady Fern.

I use fuchsias for foliage as well as flowers – carefully, because the yellow-leaved ‘Genii’ goes green in shade (as do many yellow-leaved cultivars of many kinds of plant) whereas Fuchsia ‘Tom West’ (fig. 6), which is white and pink variegated, keeps its leaf colour as well as flowering red. The supreme yellow-leaved shade-lover that does not green up is *Lamprocapnos* (syn. *Dicentra*) *spectabilis* ‘Gold Heart’ (fig. 7), which has pink-red flowers in spring as well.

Begonias will provide foliage colours too and they adore shade. Plant them in blocks and avoid prissy edgings and repetition. Some are even hardy like ‘Benitochiba’ (fig. 8) with its pink and silver leaves. *Heucheras* seem to cope well with moderate shade and can provide wonderful colour. I enjoy the khaki-brown of ‘Bronze Beauty’ next to the athyrium, and the almost impossible pink of *Heuchera* ‘Berry Smoothie’. I have a large old plant of *Heuchera* ‘Pistache’ (fig. 9) which has moved up in pot sizes but never made it into the ground. I move the
pot around to lighten the shadier parts of the garden. It’s particularly effective in winter.

Vary the foliage textures. Avoid fuzzy. Fuzzy is another defence against high light levels, so it isn’t natural to shade and it wouldn’t look right, but you can use a little grassy texture. Grasses tend to avoid shade too, but there are some splendid exceptions. Wood Millet (*Melica uniflora*) is a British native of dry woodland. In gardens the neat, white-flowered form, *M. uniflora f. albida* gets to about 25cm high, sparkles in spring and persists, still looking good, until the winter. The variegated form is all white and pink. Don’t cut them, these are ornamental grasses! *Camellia* textures are the opposite of fuzzy. I grow *C. japonica* ‘Lovelight’ (fig. 10). The relatively large, dark-green leaves are incredibly glossy, and reflect light and movement in a very dark space. Keep them in scale by cutting them back after flowering, and limit yourself to one or two because their foliage is very dominant. If you garden in alkaline conditions grow one in acid compost in a big pot.

Use big foliage – it will complement the bold planting. Many shade-tolerant or shade-loving plants naturally have big foliage. Bergenias are good (so much better than all those scruffy ones of my youth). If you want traditional shiny-leaved varieties, I’d plump for the biggest – ‘Ballawley’, ‘XXL’ (a new introduction) or ‘Bartok’, but you also need to know that the species *Bergenia ciliata* (fig. 11), whose leaves are covered in a pile of soft hairs, has some very large-leaved forms like ‘Wilton’. Hydrangeas are usually fairly large-leaved, but if you want a giant choose *Hydrangea aspera* subsp. *sargentiana* (fig. 12), whose felted leaves can reach 30cm wide.

You can use shape like you might use a sculpture. A larger grass like the Spreading Bottlebrush Grass, *Hystrix patula*, would look good isolated from similar shapes. Or you can install some weirdly shaped plants like arisaemas or podophyllums to draw the eye. I have an enormous plant of *Podophyllum versipelle* ‘Spotty Dotty’, 55cm high and a metre across.
It delights with its large, handsomely patterned, polygonal peltate foliage and clusters of large maroon flowers. Ferns too can make fabulously shaped plants, plants such as *Matteuccia struthiopteris* with its giant green shuttlecocks, or some of the best forms of Hart’s Tongue Fern like *Asplenium scolopendrium* Crispum Group. Aspidistras and clivias need seriously dark places. They both have shapely form (and the clivias good flowers too), although the clivias need really sheltered gardens. The foliage of *Arum italicum* subsp. *italicum* ‘Marmoratum’ is well patterned and arrow shaped. It comes up in autumn, furnishes the garden in winter and dies down at the end of the spring.

Walls and fences need softening with climbers. Softening doesn’t mean obscuring or covering – a bit of an exposed plane surface is a useful adjunct to any garden providing contrast and helping to frame it.

Many climbers are light loving and climb to reach the light then flower out of sight. Avoid them.

I like the *Clematis viticella* cultivars like ‘Alba Luxurians’ and the immensely vigorous and long-flowering honeysuckle *Lonicera similis* var. *delavayi*. Recently I’ve discovered *Clematis urophylla* ‘Winter Beauty’ (fig. 13) and I’m bowled over by its abundant large winter flowers and good foliage.

*Schizophragma hydrangeoides* var. *concolor* ‘Moonlight’ (fig. 14) has grey and green foliage and remarkably perfumed white-bracted flowers from ground to the top. Related *Pileostegia viburnoides* is a self-clinging evergreen climber for north walls with scented cream flowers. *Akebia quinata* has scented purple-pink flowers and evergreen, palmate-lobed foliage and is very good in shade. Most clematis and honeysuckles cope with shade very well too.
The grass is always greener over the septic tank. I know many people who have created shade because they had none, and others who wantonly remove trees instead of living with them.

Take a deep breath and swim with the tide. If it’s shade you’ve got, feel blessed and use it to create an amazing garden you can really enjoy.

Bob Brown is a notable plantsman, garden writer, speaker and nurseryman who grows and gardens in Worcestershire. See www.cgf.net for more of Bob’s advice.
Biennials are the careful, conservative investors of the plant world, putting all their earnings into long-term stocks. They usually spend their first year as rather boring low rosettes of foliage. They keep their heads down, working hard all summer storing up energy so that the following spring they can burst out of the ground running, often putting on 2–3m of growth, giving instant height and maturity in a way no shrub can hope to do for several years yet. Almost nothing grows as fast as a biennial on its way up to flower. Onopordums will go from nought to 2m in 90 days – more than 2cm a day! I love watching plants grow that fast – the garden burgeons around me.

Then of course the plants begin to bloom. And bloom. And bloom. Now they are profligate with all that energy they saved, spending it in a mad flurry, no need to worry about next year, just flowering their socks off in order to produce as much seed as possible since they are about to die.

Because they are living on last summer’s stored energy, biennials have a head start on the competition and bloom earlier than most perennials, filling the gap between the bulbs and the roses.

We think of annuals as plants which take one season to grow, flower, set seed and die; biennials as plants which take two seasons; and monocarpic plants as those which take three or more seasons. Technically all three are monocarpic (‘mono’ meaning one and ‘carpic’ meaning seed – not that...
They make only one seed, but that they produce seed only once). Because we have a word for one-season and two-season plants we generally use monocarpic to refer to those slow coaches which take three or more seasons.

Of course, plants don’t know about the tidy classifications gardeners like to put them into, so many are somewhere between annual and biennial and monocarpic or even perennial. Some short-lived perennials make particularly useful biennials as they frequently give you a second bite of the cherry the following, third, year.

Biennials almost all sow themselves freely, but if you want to get them started, sow in late spring the year before they are wanted. (Most actually live one year rather than two. They need two growing seasons rather than two calendar years.) If you sow when you see the plant starting to bloom in the garden, your seedlings will have a head start over the self-sown ones which have to wait for this year’s seed to ripen.

The seedlings need no special protection; the weather is kind by the time you want to sow them. They can be sown outside in the ground, or in pots, and transplanted into their final positions in autumn. Even if you are growing them in the ground, it is wise to keep a few in pots in a cold frame over winter, as in very wet winters there can be quite a few losses in the garden. Bursting at the seams by March, 9cm pots will do the job fine, but I find the plants easier to manage if I give them a little more room over the winter – 1 or 1½L pots are ample. If in spring you pot on a couple of foxgloves or some Chimney Bellflowers into 3 or 4L pots, you can fill unexpected holes in the garden, giving instant height or colour exactly where it is needed.

A few, like the angelicas, need a cold period to germinate, so they are sown in late summer or autumn, overwinter outside and germinate in spring. They really do take two years to bloom as they grow through the following summer and strut their stuff the year after.

The seedlings of many biennials such as Smyrium and Eryngium giganteum look nothing like the mature plant. They seem to think it is in their best interest to be as inconspicuous as possible. It is important to learn to recognise the young plants, or you may either weed them all out or be overwhelmed by them.
Everyone wants their garden to be instantly full of colour and drama. All those thoughtfully placed shrubs, clumps of herbaceous perennials and groundcover plants tend to look lonely for the first year or two.

With a pinch of seed and a little forethought you can transform the first years of a new garden or revitalise any tired parts of an old garden.

There are biennials for every situation:

**For shade**

We all grow foxgloves (*Digitalis*). Or rather they usually grow themselves and we reduce their encroachments. There is a magnificent one called ‘Pam’s Choice’ (fig. 1) which has white flowers with a dark purple throat. They grow into the biggest foxgloves I have ever seen – mine must have been 3m tall. I could not reach the tops standing on tiptoe, and I am not short!

A more modest white foxglove with adorable twisted petals is *Digitalis purpurea* f. *albiflora* ‘Anne Redetzky’ (fig. 2). A soft creamy white, each flower is split open with petals that flare backwards. It is less inclined to sow itself, so I think it is worth the extra trouble of collecting its relatively few seeds in order to keep this quirky accident going.

Annuals can fill in with colour and brighten the place up, but for sheer drama, exuberance, and breath-taking display, let me sing the praises of biennials.

**Fig. 5** Climbing Fumitory (*Adlumia fungosa*) grows up to 6m from a standing start.

**Fig. 6** Variegated honesty, *Lunaria annua* var. *albiflora* ‘Alba Variegata’.

**Fig. 7** *Lunaria* ‘Corfu Blue’. 
Sweet Rocket (*Hesperis matronalis*) (fig. 3) will thrive even in dry shade. Its lavender-pink flowers have a sweet, grandmotherly fragrance. The white form is particularly valuable in shady gardens.

On damp spring days the acid yellow of Alexanders (*Smyrnium perfoliatum*) (figs 4a & b) cuts through the grey weather like a knife. These sow themselves generously, but usually take 3 or 4 years to get big enough to bloom. They are only above ground for about a month every year so you hardly notice you have them until that amazing colour calls to you across the garden.

There are very few biennial climbers for some reason, but Climbing Fumitory or Allegheny Vine (the hideously named *Adlumia fungosa*) (fig. 5) is a lovely one. Related to Bleeding Hearts (*Dicentra*), it will cover a wall or a large shrub with its delicate foliage and little pale pink lockets. It prefers a sheltered position out of the sun and wind.

Perhaps the most stunning biennial for shade is the white-flowered, white-variegated honesty, *Lunaria annua* var. *albiflora* ‘Alba Variegata’ (fig. 6). Don’t be put off by the green rosettes you get the first year. Leaves on the flowering stems next year will be heavily splashed with white, and then come the white flowers – they fairly leap out of a shady corner. *Lunaria a.* ‘Corfu Blue’ (fig. 7) flowers are a lovely blue-purple, followed by purple-flushed seedpods. It’s a new introduction from the Greek islands where it seems to have morphed into a semi-perennial, coming back from the base for 2 or 3 years of bloom. The old plants bloom earlier than other lunarias because they have overwintered as mature plants.

**For part sun**

An old cottage-garden favourite, *Campanula pyramidalis* (fig. 8) is known as the Chimney Bellflower because it used to be grown in large pots and brought inside to bloom on the empty hearth at midsummer. Given a few hours of sun each day it will produce a 2m pyramidal tower of blue or white flowers for weeks at midsummer.

Rose Campion or Dusty Miller, *Lychnis coronaria* (fig. 9) will grow almost anywhere, in sun or shade. The usual form has brilliant magenta flowers on cool grey leaves, but the more refined
'Oculata' has white flowers which develop a pink 'eye' in the middle as they age. I have found a particularly deep red form I like which I call 'Blood Red'.

**For full sun**

In full sun of course you are spoilt for choice. The ravishing angelicas need your very best conditions, rich soil, not too dry. But they will repay you with stunning architectural foliage and big, bold flowerheads. *Angelica gigas* has deep-purple, rounded flowerheads and purple stems above green leaves. *Angelica sylvestris* 'Purpurea' (fig. 10), or 'Ebony', has deep-satiny-purple leaves in tiers, from which emerge shining dark-red buds opening into flat grey-pink flowerheads. For an astonishing contrast, plant the dark-leaved Angelica in front of the Scotch Thistle, *Onopordum nervosum*, a towering 3m silver ghost in the garden.

*Eryngium giganteum* blooms later than most biennials, producing its startling silver bracts in July. It is known as 'Miss Willmott’s Ghost' (fig. 11) because she is said to have sprinkled a bit of seed when she visited your garden, confident you would never weed out all the unobtrusive seedlings and the following year you'd be amazed by the stiff stems holding their flat silvery-white spiny ruffs.
The black-leaved Cow Parsley, *Anthriscus sylvestris* ‘Ravens Wing’ (fig. 12), is another biennial umbel which seeds itself through my garden. Being biennial is a relatively unusual strategy in the plant world, but a surprisingly high proportion of umbels (and of vegetables) are second-year seeders.

Almost all verbascums are either short-lived or biennial. Many of them race for the sky the second year, making handsome pillars of yellow flowers, often on silver-grey downy leaves. But my favourite verbascum is quite short and has plain green leaves. *V. creticum* (fig. 13) is completely biennial, never does a second year, but does seed itself about. A metre tall, it has the biggest flowers of any Verbascum, and moreover they are fragrant!

Most rudbeckias are big perennial yellow daisies from the American prairies. *Rudbeckia triloba*, Brown-eyed Susan (fig. 14), is smaller, daintier and biennial. A metre-high cloud of clear-yellow small daisies for months in late summer and autumn. The new hybrid ‘Prairie Glow’ shimmers with red, bronze and yellow, a warm glow of a plant.

For dry, poor soil in full sun *Hedysarum coronarium*, the French Honeysuckle (fig. 15) (neither French nor honeysuckle of course), is hard to beat.
Really a giant clover, 7–10cm-long scarlet flower spikes arch out above its beautiful lobed leaves.

The long, curving seedheads give *Glaucium corniculatum* (fig. 16) its common name, Horned Poppy. It grows wild in the shingle by the sea so it’s another plant for sun and drainage. The crinkly grey leaves are so beautiful you could grow it just as a foliage plant, but the red-orange poppies are perfectly set off by the silvery leaves.

Perhaps the most fragrant plant I grow is the perennial White Stock, *Matthiola perennis ‘Alba’* (fig. 17). One plant can scent the whole garden. Pure white flowers on grey leaves in May and June. It is really a short-lived perennial, but needs to be replaced every few years as it gets unattractively woody. Fortunately it’s very easy from seed so is best treated as a biennial.

For the excitement of unexpected drifts of self-sown plants, for filling gaps, or for tiding you over while you wait patiently for your beautifully planned new garden to grow up around you, nothing can beat beautiful, bountiful biennials.

**Derry Watkins** was born in America, married an Englishman and moved to the UK 40 years ago. A passionate gardener, in 1987 she started Special Plants Nursery. In 1996 she and her husband bought a derelict barn to convert into a house, and the fields around it into a garden. In 1999 she gave up exhibiting at flower shows in order to concentrate on the garden (open every Tuesday April–October). She sells seed, mostly collected from the garden, and plants propagated from the garden. See www.specialplants.net
In the last issue I mentioned that *Sedum* ‘Purple Emperor’ is a contender for my top five Desert Island plants; it prompted a reader to suggest I write about my Top Ten so, with our editor’s blessing, here goes. I’m writing in mid-winter and, given the chance, I’d probably just go for the desert island and hang the plants, so much is my heart longing for sun and warmth.

Choosing hasn’t been easy, because my garden is stuffed with plants. However I am ruthless: if anything fails to please it’s out. That’s the key to having a good garden, and the village fete is a good off-loading point – though I do put some stunners in as well.

I adore fragrance, but it has to be a powerful fragrance to make any impact in my cold, wind-prone plot. You might imagine that fragrance is a summer affair, but winter flowers are often highly scented because they have to lure the early bees into their comparatively compact flowers, blooms capable of surviving wintry weather. A blowsy rose, so lovely in summer, would soon perish in winter. So my first choice is Wintersweet (*Chimonanthus praecox*) (fig. 1) because I can smell it even on the cool days between Christmas and the end of January when the sweet fragrance of *Daphne bholua* and my witch hazels evaporates into thin air.

I can also pick Wintersweet and it will last for many a day in a kitchen where my Aga blazes away. It will cheer me up on the dullest, dankest day. The claw-like flowers are almost waxy, with pale-yellow narrow petals raggedly arranged around a warm pomegranate-red centre. It survives frost, much more so than viburnums. The flowers hang on bare branches and I have a preference for plants that flower before they leaf up – they have a touch of magic.

There are two forms, ‘Grandiflorus’ and ‘Luteus’, and both have an AGM, although many think ‘Grandiflorus’ better because it flowers when young. I planted mine in good, fertile soil in a sunny position about eight years ago, and it’s made a two-metre roundel.
The downside is the summer foliage, which is rather ordinary and prone to damage, probably from leaf miner. Despite that, it excites me every year. Try to buy your plant in flower, to be sure you get a good one. Give it a bright position and space, because this is a medium to large shrub.

I have to have a snowdrop, obviously, and I love the six-petalled form of *G. elwesii* named ‘Godfrey Owen’ (fig.2), which stands proud with a strong presence. It was named by Margaret Owen, who sadly died last year. Five or so years ago Margaret gave me my first bulb, and because I loved her it’s especially cherished. It’s a doer, so will bulk up, and it’s significantly different from other *Galanthus*, and I can’t say that about all the snowdrops I’ve bought over the years.

The glaucous foliage of all forms of *G. elwesii* indicate that it likes a bright position and such positions are easy at Spring Cottage because we face south and perch on a very high plateau – in summer we get harsh, glaring light from dawn to dusk.

I have to have a crocus too, and I adore ‘Yalta’ (fig.3), a medium-sized purple and grey crocus with a bright-orange feather duster inside. Unfortunately the voles love it too – they seem to be able to sniff it out. Voles and shrews abound here, hiding in the crevices of my low stone walls, entertaining Poppy Cat for hours. They also penetrate the airing cupboard and love to nibble Imperial Leather soap, ignoring Pears and Yardley’s Lavender in the same way they select ‘Yalta’. What taste!

In Janis Ruksans’s excellent book, *Buried Treasure*, he says that ‘Yalta’ (which he named) is a seedling between *C. tommasinianus* and a Dutch Crocus, and that the seeds came from Nikitsky Botanic Garden in Yalta. I struggled with this choice, because I also love ‘Vanguard’, a purple and grey form of *C. vernus* collected in Russia in 1934. Called ‘Vanguard’ because it flowers much earlier than most large-flowered crocus, it’s readily available now. E A Bowles, the crocus king, writing in the revised 1952 version of *A Handbook of Crocus and Colchicums for Gardeners*, calls it remarkable and tells us that it was selected by Mr Hoog, who knew it as *C. vernus* ‘Petropolowsky’.

Fig. 2 *Galanthus elwesii* ‘Godfrey Owen’

Fig. 3 *Crocus* ‘Yalta’
A little too Russian sounding to sell in the 1950s and 1960s when the Cold War was at its height.

Peonies are one of my great passions and they do well here in this cold, well-lit garden on the spring line. It’s so difficult to choose just one because I have lots of species, *P. lactiflora* cultivars, and hybrids. Species, so fleeting that you can miss them entirely in a busy week, disqualify themselves on that basis. The *P. lactiflora* flowers can last for weeks, and many are fragrant with scent ranging from citrus, to lily, to almost coconut. Their buds swell in May, when the garden burgeons, above foliage that blends wonderfully well with roses. Ants scramble over the buds to feed on the sugary secretion, a reminder that the natural world is waking. You can pick them when they are the size of marshmallows and enjoy them inside should you wish. Colours vary, and the pastel pinks, creams and darker pinks of the French-bred ones add to the romance. The American ones are brasher, like Henry James heroines, in shades of coral, day-glo pink and deep red – colours that don’t fade under the intense sunlight the inner states enjoy, but with a hardy enough constitution to withstand their extremely cold winters. Stop prevaricating, Val, and choose one.
If the day came when I had to move to my desert island I would pick ‘Monsieur Jules Elie’ (fig. 4), bred by Crousse in 1888. The pale-pink flowers are bomb shaped, extremely petal packed, and rounded off to an ice-cream scoop. What’s more the centre of the plant hasn’t a hint of yellow to spoil the femininity, because there are no stamens. The heavy-headed flowers flop gracefully. They’d have to defy gravity to do anything else, but rusty metal semi-circular hoops prevent them going too far. It’s cheap and easy, although it bears several large flowers rather than the fifty or so I can get on others. I love it because the colour is exactly coconut-ice pink with a silver shimmer, and the colour changes as the flowers age. It’s highly scented, almost coconut and lily, and it’s the last to flower. When it emerges I know that peony time is over!

French peony breeding is rather like pass the parcel. The breeder Felix Crousse acquired his peony stock from Jacques Calot of Douai, who had bred around twenty peonies including the iconic citrus-scented cream-white ‘Duchesse de Nemours (1856). When Crousse retired in 1898 his stock and nursery in Nancy was acquired by Victor Lemoine who, with his son Emile, in 1906 bred ‘Sarah Bernhardt’. These peonies are all pastel and feminine because the growers made most of their money from selling cut flowers, which remained a nursery tradition until the 1950s. In the early years of the 20th century James Kelway of Somerset bred more peonies and exported them widely to America and beyond. It was the Wall Street Crash which bankrupted the nursery, then the biggest in the world.

Now I’ve got a peony I must have a rose to follow on, and that’s an almost harder choice. I am addicted to Hybrid Musks, but ‘Buff Beauty’ takes a long time to get her toes under and mature into the terrific rose it can be, and I’m planning on the Best Beloved rescuing...
me from the island for, just like roses and peonies, we’re better together than apart. These roses, bred in the dry county of Essex, prefer a warm spot and my garden is far from that, so I struggle on with Hybrid Musks as I love their Edwardian style.

After much deliberation I’m going for, drumroll please, a Floribunda called ‘Joie de Vivre’ (fig. 5), bred by the German rose company Kordes and awarded Rose of the Year in 2011. It’s beautifully formed, with peach-pink flowers worthy of an old-fashioned rose. And it’s bombproof: Kordes (roses with a breeding name that begins with KOR) are robust and virtually indestructible, because Kordes select and breed from completely healthy stock and have been doing so since the 1970s. ‘Joie de Vivre’ is compact, with strong stems and good foliage, and it always has a late flourish. I grow quite a few roses and this one’s a stunner.

Floribundas have had a bad press and countless garden writers have poured scorn upon them. However, their ability to produce clusters of flower and their tendency to be compact and floriferous make them ideal companions for a mixed border. Gone are the days when gardens and parks went in for the dedicated rose bed. We prefer roses in mixed planting and Floribundas are made for the job. I had the pleasure of speaking to the Historic Rose Society at Broughton Castle in June 2014, and they listened kindly to my affection for modern floribundas. They had wanted Stephen Lacey, so I was only the substitute!

I have to choose an iris too, because my mother was an Iris and it’s my middle name. I hated the name as a child, but I’ve warmed to it in later life. My chosen Tall Bearded Iris was acquired at our village fete, donated by Lady Wade-Gery who had inherited it from her mother who gardened in Norfolk. The name, supplied at the time, didn’t stick, but this iris flourished on the edge of my path. Every time I returned home in late May and June it welcomed me with its combination of bronzed light-lavender standards and velvet brownish-
purple falls. So much flower and so much elegance made it my favourite iris ever.

An afternoon out to visit a National Collection of irises held by Anne Milner in a nearby village brought me up short, because I spotted my iris looking equally glorious in a collection of Arthur Bliss irises. It was ‘Mrs Valerie West’ (fig. 6) and Lady Wade-Gery confirmed the name and told me that it was a favourite of her mother’s. The story of Arthur Bliss emerged and can be found on the Telegraph website under my name – *The sheer bliss of finding a lost iris.*

Arthur J Bliss (1862–1931) was a major iris breeder in the early years of the 20th century. Deafness led to his retiring at 40 when, encouraged by Britain’s foremost iris authority, William Rickatson Dykes, he moved to Morwellham Quay on the banks of the River Tamar and devoted himself to breeding irises. Bliss was an eccentric who stuffed his office papers and plant notebooks under the lid of a grand piano, which sounds a little like my desk which is legendary among friends and family. He wrote down his latest crosses with chalk on the floor and he was notoriously badly dressed. In contrast, his plant records and his gardens were meticulously kept. So when ‘Mrs Valerie West’ flowers on my desert island I could think of Arthur, who drew other breeders to the Tamar Valley, and the chaos of his rooms at The Ship Inn.

I have to carry on the Edwardian theme and choose another English classic that rose to fame in the first half of the 20th century – the garden phlox or *P. paniculata.* They do so well for me here on fertile soil that tends not to dry out. They are scented and they perform in the second half of summer when butterflies descend and feed. Their panicles of flower are almost domed, an unusual shape that breaks up the stranglehold that daisies have at that time of year. Phlox stems are strong and the foliage often excellent long before the flowers.

It’s so hard to plump for one, for it’s not long since we had the RHS Border Phlox trial, one of the most enjoyable trials I’ve ever judged. Hundreds shone there, but I’m going to go for the lavender ‘Franz Schubert’ (fig. 7), bred by Alan Bloom in 1980.
Jennifer Harmer (HPS historian and Phlox expert) describes it as parma-violet with just a tinge of pink. It’s vigorous and it’s tall and it will remind me of Alan Bloom, who was a great friend. I recall sitting in his small study, fire alight, discussing plants and nibbling Cadbury’s milk chocolate whilst listening to Schubert, always wondering why he bothered with little old me. On fine evenings we’d sit under a tree and I was heartbroken when he died. The Phlox trial at RHS Wisley brought me into contact with Jaime Blake, Alan’s son-in-law (correct spelling here – his ma was French). Jaime is the Curator of Alan’s Dell Garden at Bressingham, a living library of plants that everyone should visit.

I have a strong affection for orange, because it redefines blue and purple in the garden setting, making both more dynamic. I love *Helenium ‘Sahin’s Early Flowerer’* (fig. 8) because this hybrid has the ability to flower earlier and go on flowering. It will tolerate drier conditions too, so those who’ve previously failed with heleniums will succeed with this dazzler with its astounding range of differently coloured and marked flowers. The late Kees Sahin, a Dutch seedsman, was a true plantsman who would develop seed-strains purely for the love of plants. Bob Brown named this prize seedling after Kees and distributed it. Kees’s large physique, pin-striped suit and clogs were an unforgettable sight at the London RHS shows.

I must also choose a grass because nothing else adds movement and texture in the same way. The problem is that my garden is so cold that many flower very late or not at all. Panicums refuse to play ball. Miscanthus flower only from September onwards and pennisetum looks miserable, like a jilted lover. So I will opt for the New Zealand Toe Toe Grass, *Cortaderia richardii* (fig. 9), which puts out elegant, one-sided awns in early July, dwarfing my girl-shed. This is the plant that stops hikers on the Macmillan Way in their tracks. It is not for a small garden: it occupies a chunk of ground but how I love it!

I like form in a garden and one of my best evergreens is *Bupleurum griffithii* (fig. 10). It’s one of the very few shrubby umbellifers and, although it has a tendency to do well for ten years and then decline, it makes August sparkle with an abundance of lime-green flowerheads. It survives despite the cold,
and I plant alpine clematis under its skirts so that they scramble through to perform in April, backed by the leathery grey-green leaves. It’s left to its own devices over winter and then, after the worst is over, I snip off the brown seedheads that have helped protect the evergreen leaves.

Shortly afterwards the colchicums begin and ‘Nancy Lindsay’ is a favourite because it’s early and it holds its mauve-pink slender flowers erect. It’s a meadow saffron, officially known as *Colchicum autumnale* ‘Nancy Lindsay’, and named after Norah Lindsay’s daughter. Nancy was a great companion of Lawrence ‘Johnny’ Johnston of Hidcote Manor. When Johnston died in 1958 he left his estate in France, Serre de la Madone, to Nancy. Rumour had it that she would rather have had Hidcote, in any case she soon sold his French property on. I like plants that strike the season, warn you that the year is on the move, and ‘Nancy Lindsay’ is a forerunner of autumn.

Of course in naming my Top Ten I’ve chosen my Top Eleven. But isn’t that the way with plants, we can never have enough. They’re like friends who come to visit. I’m not a solitary person so I’d need a goodly number on my desert island.

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Val Bourne is an award-winning writer, author and lecturer. See www.valbourne.co.uk
2014 saw an excellent response to the Society’s third photo competition with almost double the number of entries, perhaps as a result of great weather and the option to submit entries by email. Close-up photography was much in evidence – a technique which can produce outstanding images but is much harder than it looks!

**Category one: individual hardy perennial – whole plant or close-up**

This category drew the largest number of entries. It was won by Tony Bays for his carefully balanced picture of the old favourite *Paeonia mlokosewitschii*, or Molly the Witch to her friends (front cover). The judges particularly liked the picture’s soft, subtle colouring. They also enjoyed the contrast between the central flowerhead which is in sharp focus, and the receding, softer focus of the surrounding petals and background leaves.

Runner-up was the photo of *Nerine ‘Zeal Giant’* by Karin Proudfoot. The judges loved the vibrant colour in the picture, and they also enjoyed the contrast between the dark background and the brilliance of the flower itself.

In third place was Michael Neal for his image of *Romneya coulteri*, with its beautifully textured petals, nicely emphasised by the angle of the lighting.
Category two: a plant grouping, border, garden view or HPS event
Richard Ford won this category with his grouping of Hosta ‘So sweet’ with coordinating foliage. The judges thought this was an exceptionally beautiful image.

They drew attention to the way in which colour, form and composition were all perfectly integrated, both as a garden design and a photographic image. The golden theme recurs nicely from top right to the hostas at bottom left, while contrasting leaf shapes are successfully managed and the white flowers give a subtle lift to the dominant greens and yellows.

Second prize went to Adrian James for his view of summer borders at Wildside Garden in Devon. This is a deceptively simple image, in which the balance
of the composition is in fact carefully considered. A beautiful picture of a beautiful border.

Third place was won by Mitch Buss for a photograph taken in her garden near Elgin, Scotland, in June. The judges described it as a very painterly image, having great depth – it leads the eye from the foreground poppies through to the sunlit field beyond.

**Category three: a picture by members’ children or grandchildren (16 or under) on any garden subject**

The winner was Jamie Duguid – the only one of last year’s winners to repeat the feat in 2014! His picture of agapanthus at Coton Manor was well composed and had strong colour and shape, producing a vibrant image.

My thanks go to the judges, Ruth Baumberg and Barry Sheridan, for completing a task made more difficult by the high number of quality images submitted by members.

I hope you have been inspired by this year’s winners to submit some entries of your own in 2015. The email address is photocomp@hardy-plant.org.uk and full details will appear in the July newsletter.
I was probably about seven or eight years old when I first became aware of rhododendrons. It was the Easter holiday and I was with a group of friends in South Wales, and we were on one of our regular skirmishes with nature that usually involved building dens, climbing trees and damming small streams. On this particular day we wandered outside our usual hunter and gatherer range and came across a small wood packed with *Rhododendron ponticum* in full flower (fig. 1) and I was hooked for life.

I thought that rhododendrons were the most amazing plants I had ever seen, and I just had to take a bunch of the huge flowers home for my mum. I was expecting a hero’s welcome for returning with such a prize but this was not to be. Instead, my mum became very flustered and said it was unlucky to bring flowering shrubs into the house and she would only allow them in the windowless garden shed. I could not understand this at all because, unlike nowadays, we were encouraged to pick wild flowers and take them home. Only much later did I discover that the wood belonged to a member of the local gentry who owned most of the houses in our village, ours included, and who collected the rent weekly in person. I guess that my mum felt that he might not appreciate seeing a large bunch of his prize rhododendrons on our living-room table.

When I married and we bought our first home, rhododendrons and azaleas were right at the top of the list of plants we wanted for our small garden. Despite the fact that the soil was not acid, added peat and sequestrene did the trick and they grew reasonably well.

Our second home had an acid soil and rhododendrons grew well without having to add peat. They were very much in fashion at this time and expensive to buy. In my day job I was teaching undergraduate students about a technique called meristem propagation, used to eradicate virus from fruit stocks like raspberries, strawberries, apples and pears. This technique became better known as micropropagation when used to propagate plants which were slow to multiply by traditional techniques.
Rhododendrons were amongst the first hardy ornamental plants to be propagated this way, and on a visit to a horticultural trade fair to look for a new CO\textsuperscript{2} analyser for our university laboratory I came across a Canadian nursery selling micropropagated rhododendrons. The range was huge and the small plants, about 3cm high, were very inexpensive (about 50p at today’s prices). I ordered 500 plantlets in 50 varieties which duly arrived a few weeks later. I do remember that getting the plants through customs at Manchester airport and their onward delivery to York cost far more that getting their health certified in Canada and flying them across the Atlantic! I grew the plants on and started selling them together with other acid-loving species at the early plant fairs at Beningbrough Hall and other National Trust sites.

When we moved to our current home, with much more space, I bought a large second-hand poly tunnel and increased our range of acid-loving plants, and started selling plants from home on spring weekends. I loved doing this, especially the propagation, but we stopped a number of years ago because of the pressures of academic life and the demands of a growing family.

Most of our customers were knowledgeable fellow enthusiasts but we did have the occasional individual who was unhappy with our plants. A regular customer came in one weekend and wanted a very special plant for her mother’s ‘significant’ birthday. She persuaded me to part with a lovely specimen of *R. yakushimanum* (figs 2, 3 & 4) that I didn’t really want to sell.

This species is my all-time favourite. It is very compact and has pink, bell-shaped flowers that fade to white, but the most distinctive feature of this native Japanese species is the dense indumentum that coats both surfaces of the leaves. The fine silvery hairs on the upper surface are thought to reflect light to reduce leaf temperature, and the very dense, velvety hairs on the underside are thought to reduce water loss. These features are vital to the species because it grows naturally in very exposed positions on Yakushima, a small, mountainous island off the south coast of Japan.

Plants of this species were also the favourites of our children who, when small, would spend ages gently rubbing off the ‘fluff’ from the upper surfaces of the leaves to reveal the dark-green shiny surface beneath.

Unfortunately, the mum whose significant birthday was being celebrated was less enthusiastic and did not like this plant at all. About a month after the plant left our nursery it returned with its new and very unhappy owner. She explained that her daughter had bought it as a special present but she would like to swap it for one that was not diseased. I was surprised and somewhat upset by this, because the plant looked a picture of health.
The unhappy recipient explained that you only had to look at the plant to see that it was covered in ‘mouldy fungus’ and she was surprised that her daughter, whom she considered to be a good gardener, had not noticed it herself. She didn’t want to offend her daughter so she’d found out where the plant had been purchased and now she wanted a healthy replacement.

She went on to tell me that she had spent hours removing the ‘mouldy fungus’ from the upper leaf surfaces with a J-Cloth and Fairy Liquid but within a couple of weeks it had all come back. I explained, to no avail, that the ‘mouldy fungus’ was in fact the indumentum and it was a major attraction of the plant, and that many Rhododendron experts spend more time looking at the indumenta than the flowers. There was no persuading her, however, she knew a mouldy plant when she saw one and was having nothing to do with it. This story had a happy ending because I was delighted to get my specimen back and she was happy with her choice of a ‘healthy’ replacement.

Despite running down our small nursery more than a decade ago, I have always propagated a few plants each year for use in our own garden, and to give to friends and swap with fellow enthusiasts.

I recently gave a close friend who was redesigning her garden a specimen of *Magnolia stellata* ‘Water Lily’. Apparently it was much admired by one of her work colleagues who subsequently got in contact by email and asked if I had any plants to sell. I replied that I had a small range of magnolias and rhododendrons and a few other shrubs.

She wrote:

Dear Peter,
I was going to express interest in a few rhododendrons, but I watched a TV programme last night about weeds and decided that they (rhododendrons) are all rather nasty foreign invaders that won’t do much for the general ecology of our garden, so I am having second thoughts at the moment. I will be back in touch soon.

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Figs 3 & 4 *R. yakushimanum* indumentum.
A few days later I received this:

I have now found a website that proves that rhododendrons are a serious threat to the British countryside. It further suggests that once you have them they are impossible to get rid of, so I definitely don’t want any thanks very much.

I am however, still looking for a specimen Monkey Puzzle tree so if you come across a good one will you please let me know?

Initially I felt offended by this exchange, but on a second read I thought it highly amusing – surely she must realise that not all rhododendrons are the same, and just what would a Monkey Puzzle do for the general ecology of her garden? However, it did get me to reflect on R. ponticum, which I guessed was the ‘nasty foreign invader’ to which she referred. I do appreciate the very serious problems this species causes in many parts of the country (figs 5 & 6), and especially so, now that it has been recognised as a major host for the very dangerous fungal pathogen, Phytophthora ramorum, that threatens many woody species of plant.

However, I wasn’t sure why R. ponticum was so different from all the other species and hybrid rhododendrons that are impeccably behaved in our gardens. Indeed, in my experience choice plants are more likely to die than run riot, even in good growing conditions. The answer to these questions has been revealed recently by some fascinating research into the genetics of the invasive and difficult-to-eradicate wild R. ponticum by James Cullen from the Stanley Smith (UK) Horticultural Trust in Cambridge.

Fig. 5  R. x superponticum growing at Tatton Park.
It appears that the troublesome *R. ponticum* is not a single species but a hybrid swarm (group of interbreeding species) that has arisen by the interbreeding of four species: *R. ponticum* from Iberia and *R. maximum*, *R. catawbiense* and *R. macrophyllum* from North America. The original Iberian *R. ponticum* is not reliably hardy in the UK but the first two North American species are extremely hardy and have passed on this trait to the new hybrids.

The crossing of these four species probably occurred both in nurseries and in gardens in the early nineteenth century, and the resulting hybrids both escaped naturally into the wild and were very actively spread by landowners keen to introduce shrubby cover into their woodlands for the protection of game birds.

James Cullen has proposed that the invasive ‘ponticums’ be named collectively as *Rhododendron x superponticum*\(^2\). Rhododendrons bought from nurseries don’t have the features of the thuggish *R. x superponticum*, but provided you have suitable acid soil they do have many desirable features: vibrant flowers in a wide variety of colours, neat evergreen habit, long life, sizes to suit all gardens or containers, and finally transplantability – what other large evergreen shrub can you move in full flower in spring from one bed in your garden to another without its even noticing?

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\(^1\)Katharina Dehnen-Schmutz and Mark Williamson, Environment and History 12 (2006): 325-350

\(^2\)http://www.rhs.org.uk/Plants/RHS-Publications/Journals/Hanburyana/Hanburyan-issues/Volume-5--June-2011/Naturalised-rhododendrons
The bad press justifiably given to *R. × superponticum* has done serious damage to the reputation of the genus, as my email contact clearly showed. Further damage arises because Rhododendrons require acid substrates, and in the potting stage this usually means using peat-based composts – another black mark. These and possibly other factors have meant that rhododendrons and their allies are now deeply unfashionable – or at least they are with those gardeners who are followers of fashion and must have the latest *Galanthus*, *Salvia*, *Heuchera*, *Hosta* or whatever is the ‘to-die-for’ plant of the day. But fashions change, and I wouldn’t be surprised to see them return to favour in the near future – after all, what are we going to plant when we get fed up with wild-flower meadows and prairie planting!

**Peter Williams** retired from university teaching to look after his woodland garden in East Yorkshire, where the soil map characterises his soil as ‘naturally wet very acid sand of low fertility’ – just right for all the acid-loving plants he grows. He then joined the HPS to find out about herbaceous perennials.

This article was first published in the East Yorkshire HPS Group newsletter.
As I’m now in my seventies, my thoughts in recent years have turned to ways to make gardening easier. Fussy plants have been evicted, in some areas a stricter no-staking policy imposed, wood chips put down here and there, but no major changes to deal with the challenges.

Then in July 2013, seemingly out of nowhere and with absolutely no thought of less strenuous gardening, I had a strong urge to rip all the lawns up! I put it down to a garden visit a week before, a garden where miles of sinuous lawn edges hemmed in masses of colourful herbaceous planting. It was just not my sort of garden, I suppose, although others liked it.

Returning home and seeing the confined flowerbeds in my own garden, quite unexpectedly I experienced a strong aversion to them. Why? Most probably because I have come to prefer a more naturalistic look, enjoying the experience of walking amongst the planting in my gravel areas. Plants herded and imprisoned in beds, viewed face-on, seem by comparison so unnatural.

It was an overreaction, but it frightened John. Bless him, he pointed me in the direction of a smaller lawn to rip up (to start with?) and agreed to help. Oh! How I love a new project!

Fortunately this part of the garden, about 50’ x 65’, gets plenty of sun, and removing some large clipped hollies and beech to the west would open it up as well as save on future work.
The shrubby, shady corner, stuffed with spring bulbs would stay, as would the tall clipped yew and box along the path by the cottage; but the flowerbeds, of course, would go.

I took a few weeks to think about the concept, consulting favourite books for inspiration and making a planting plan to fit the aspect and conditions. Instead of beds, I first planned the swathes of grasses and then threaded narrow paths through them. Complementary accents of colour and form would come from herbaceous perennials scattered lightly throughout. Species bulbs would provide spring interest and *Tulipa sprengeri* allowed to seed out into the planting from the bulb corner.

I would use a limited selection of grasses that I knew worked on the dry, sandy loam here, and to keep costs down I soon realised that I needed to split my own plants, and quickly. Best done in spring, there was just time, in late July, to have plants rooted ready for early-autumn planting. I had herbaceous plants that would mingle well and were easily propagated, but it was an opportunity to try some new ones too. So after discussion with Kim and Stephen at Dove Cottage Nursery, I put in my order. Over the years I have learnt so much from nurserymen and women – they are usually enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and generous with advice, no less so at this nursery.

We are fortunate to have the help of a gardener once a fortnight, and lovely Ed is also very handy with a turf-lifter and mini-digger. In early September 2013 the bucket dug in, revealing thin soil and more sandstone than I had suspected; despite wondering quite what I had started, there was nothing for it but to get stuck in (figs 3 & 4).

The strong structural framework of boundary planting would set off an area of soft-textured grasses because, of course, this was going to be all about grasses. Having grown many different grasses throughout the garden, I welcomed the chance to show off their many qualities in a starring role, and to create a link with the landscape beyond the undulating boundary hedge.
This was now to be an easy-care project for my old age! Arranged in partnering swathes, the main grasses, 60 of each and mostly from divisions, are Autumn Moor-grass, *Sesleria autumnalis*, and Tufted Hair Grass, *Deschampsia cespitosa* ‘Goldtau’ (fig. 7).

*Sesleria* is durable and long lived, tufted, with glowing lime-green leaves to 12” and fairly insignificant cream inflorescences to 18”.

‘Goldtau’ is a similar size and forms a rather scruffy tuft of dark green leaves, but also billowing clouds of sparkling green/gold flowers which fade through biscuit to parchment, glorious when backlit.

For some gardeners, grasses carry negative connotations: they think them dull and invasive, but this is simply not true. The right selections are adaptable, quick to establish and easily managed, contributing diversity of form and texture, and give movement and luminous drama to a garden.

**The grass matrix**

The choice of grasses needed careful consideration. I wanted long-lived plants with minimal or no self-seeding.

Fig. 5 The whole area was covered in gravel, starting with the pathways.
Unlike the taller-flowering varieties, it has never flopped. The two make a good partnership, one providing a glow of foliage, the other a long-lasting haze above. I’ve not found *Sesleria* to self-seed, and the ‘Goldtau’ I’ve grown for many years fortunately self-seeds only lightly. I have heard that when it was first launched 30 years ago it may have been sterile but now some plants seed quite freely, particularly in warmer climes – it depends on the clone I suppose. Any seedlings will be straight *cespitosa*, a native that seeds like its life depended on it, as of course it does, so beware!

Into a small triangular patch went some *Molinia caerulea* ‘Poul Petersen’ (fig. 8). With its erect habit, and turning straw-colour in summer, rich gold in autumn, it’s used effectively en masse at Scampston Hall; reading that Piet Oudolf chose it for the cool and dry east-coast conditions, I hoped it would do well here in Northumberland, a similar distance from the coast.

Along the south-facing low stone wall I planted a row of Feather Reed-grass, *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* ‘Karl Foerster’, to provide background height for much of the year, and five *Stipa gigantea* ‘Gold Fontaene’ to form a veil of flower panicles 6ft in the air, positioned to be seen from the house against the light. ‘Gold Fontaene’ has a smaller clump of fine leaves, is more upright and taller than the species *S. gigantea*. Initially I tried my 3-year-old seedlings of ‘Gold Fontaene’, but when they produced huge leafy clumps I realised they were, in fact, the species. I should have known better and it lost me a season’s growth.

*Sporobolus heterolepis*, the Prairie Dropseed, gets a glowing report from Rick Darke in his *Encyclopedia of Grasses for Livable Landscapes* and it’s now beginning to be better known in the UK.

Fig. 6 With new plants and my own divisions there were just enough!
Elegant and refined, its thread-like leaves produce a flowing dense mound up to 15” high, deep orange in autumn, fading to a light copper in winter. Fragile open panicles are held above the plant in late summer, conspicuous in sunlight. Some I had planted three years previously were beginning to show their undoubted good qualities, taking quite a time to reach maturity but obviously worth the wait: long lived, trouble free, and suitable for mass planting. I bought only nine – I was running out of space!

To fill the gaps while the Dropseed matured, I planted self-seeding Verbascum blattaria f. albiflorum for height, and the carpeting bright-pink-flowered Potentilla nepalensis ‘Ron McBeath’, a favourite whose seeding I welcome.

These reliable plants were also put to weave around a group of Rough Feather Grass, Stipa calamagrostis, which prefers well-drained, low-nutrient soil in full sun. With a 2–3ft-high flowing fountain shape, it produces fresh silver-green flowers continuously throughout the season. I admit it seeds around, but hopefully it won’t be troublesome. It will be removed pronto if it is, despite its beauty.

Grasses are for me pure magic. Their colours change through the seasons. Their foliage and flowers, indistinct in themselves, en masse produce the luminous drama of light-trapping clouds like little else. More rarely still among plants, they dance to the lightest of breezes, bringing the garden to life.

Fig. 7 The garden was looking established within 12 months. Calamagrostis in the foreground.
**Complementary herbaceous perennials**

I’ve always found the contrast of distinct and solid shapes amongst grasses exciting, certain herbaceous plants emphasising the grasses’ airy fragility. So I chose:

- *Actaea simplex* ‘Black Negligee’ with its jagged, shiny purple-black leaves.
- *Sanguisorba officinalis* ‘Red Buttons’ for clouds of dark, punctuating dots. (This Dove Cottage selection, chosen for its compact habit and long flowering, has plum, thimble flowers which keep their colour long after similar *S*. ‘Tanna’ has faded.)
- *Heuchera* ‘Sashay’ for low, ground-anchoring clumps, with green, crinkled leaves and clouds of flowers.
- Compact *Sedum telephium* (Atropurpureum Group) ‘Karfunkelstein’ for gunmetal leaves and enduring seedheads.
- *Sium sisarum*, Skirret (fig. 9). I didn’t know quite what to expect from it but, in fact, these 5ft-tall, branched plants sport an impressive display of white umbels all summer. The two largest plants required staking after a strong wind – I even ‘pruned’ them – but it seems very good natured and will definitely stay. Seeding occurs around the parent plant, but as young seedlings looked good flowering at 18”, I can be selective.
- Loosestrife, *Lythrum virgatum* Pale Form (Piet Oudolf via Dove Cottage). I had already tried this 2-ft-high darling and just had to have it scattered through the planting for its lovely clouds of pale mauve flowers.
- *Persicaria ‘Pink Elephant’* (fig. 10). Similarly, I knew that at just 18” high this is a winner, with little trunk-like biscuit/pink flowers from June to November.
- *Veronica ‘Eveline’* (blue), *V. ‘Fantasy’* (pale lavender), and *V. longifolia ‘Blue John’* (rich blue) were new to me. In spite of a dry season and poor soil, they did unexpectedly well.
Defining the pathways
Along the low south-facing wall, and to one side of a seat, went **Persicaria amplexicaulis** 'Rosea' and **Cenolophium denudatum**; and on the other side went **Persicaria amplexicaulis** ‘Alba’ – each flower spike insignificant but impressive en masse, and new **Solidago rugosa** ‘Loydser Crown’, described as being lime green in bud with arching yellow sprays late summer – certainly an interesting and different Golden Rod.

I wanted low planting by the seat and a small sedum, which I’d scattered about, shot away. A mint-evergreen through winter into spring, the colour changes attractively through the summer, with pink star-like flowers, senescing to rust. Species tulips (fig. 11) planted in this area will happily grow through the textured carpet and together with 200 ‘Topolino’ daffodils will provide spring interest.

To the other side I planted 13 **Celmisia spectabilis** (fig. 12), refugees from the cleared flowerbeds. I hoped their exotic, spiky foliage would not look out of place. They hated life in a pot and had nowhere else to go.

To mingle at ground level along path edges, I put in, as both plants and seed, lots of a favourite self-seeding **Calamintha nepeta** subsp. **nepeta** ‘Blue Cloud’. They thrived; the perfume released when we brushed past was quite heady, bees and butterflies loving it too.

The combination along the edges of **Calamintha** with **Allium** ‘Summer Beauty’¹ (fig. 13) was an accidental winner. This allium has neat, fresh-green, slightly twisted leaves all season, and in July mauve-pink flowers (15” tall) with winged flanges to the flower stems.

¹ I spent a fascinating hour reading up on alliums on the fantastic Scottish Rock Garden web site (www.srgc.net). Although ‘Summer Beauty’ is widely used by Piet Oudolf for its habit and form, there is widespread confusion over this allium’s name. Wrongly described as **A. tuberosum** or even **A. angulosum**, according to The Onion Man (Mark Mc Donough, a well known authority on the genus who lives in Massachusetts, USA) it is an **A. senescens** hybrid, probably with some **nutans** in it. The species **senescens**, **nutans** and **angulosum** are evidently very promiscuous in gardens.
The bulbs are rhizomatous, rather like chives, and I plan to try dividing some in spring. Although it’s said to be sterile, I found and potted up a few bulbils growing in the flower heads.

I’m a great believer in decorating the ground and have grown several colours of Acaena microphylla over the years, but I hate hooked seed burrs in my gardening clothes. A. inermis ‘Purpurea’ has covered the ground with attractive metallic purple foliage, but not my clothing with burrs – it seems to be without hooks. It spreads indefinitely but is easily pulled up, and I do like the way it runs around other plants. Several low-growing Geranium ‘Dilys’ and G. ‘Light Dilys’ (fig. 14) were a delight, each a yard square with pink flowers until November.

Finally I threw some seed around, with rather too gay abandon: Digitalis parviflora, which I anticipate flowering this year (2015), for strong upright spears in flower and seed, and annual Papaver rhoeas (fig. 15), a mixture of soft pastel types, which germinated by their hundreds in the newly turned soil – I swooned at their fragile beauty, reluctantly thinning them out.

Now in February the plants are trimmed and tidied, with emerging bulbs promising a new and exciting year to come. I will continue to assess the balance of grasses to herbaceous plants, as well as their quality and suitability. A gardener’s job is never done.

I am so thankful that an impulsive decision resulted not only in a personally satisfying and joyful planting, but one that is also so easily maintained. It is simply my ‘Dream Garden’.

Fig. 15  Light and airy in a summer breeze, with complementary herbacious perennials and grasses.

Heather Russell is chairman of the North East Group. This is the last year that Heather and John will be opening their garden at Bolam Hall Garden Cottage, but we’ll be visiting Bolam and experiencing the ‘Dream Garden’ for ourselves during the HPS Autumn Weekend 4th – 6th September 2015. See www.gardencottagebolam.com
How do we know that the plant we have just acquired or have been nurturing lovingly is what the accompanying label tells us it is? The simple answer is we don’t. Catalogues from well-respected, experienced nurserymen and women often question the identity of some of the plants they have for sale. A recent article on White-flowered Japanese anemones in the RHS’s *The Plantsman* highlights the problem beautifully. The author, Brigitte Wachsmuth, suggests that many of both the white and pink-flowered cultivars on sale are not what the labels would have us believe. The National Collection Holder’s conclusion was that

Anemone × hybrida ‘Honorine Jobert’, A. × h. ‘Andrea Atkinson’ and A. × h. ‘Coupe d’Argent’ are all the same cultivar, now circulating commercially under different names.

With some plants on sale with different names in different places, and other plants incorrectly labelled, knowing what’s what can require considerable detective work.

The HPS Conservation Scheme has also suffered from the inevitable confusion as plants are grown and propagated by numerous individuals, so a not insignificant amount of time has been spent trying to sort out which plants have been named incorrectly.
Examples of plants which have been the focus of our efforts are an anemone-centred *Helianthus* – the correct identity of which continues to evade us – and an *Aster novi-belgii*, the New York Aster, which was somewhat simpler to resolve, so I’ll discuss it first.

At the annual plant exchange in 2012, the conservation plants propagated by the Groups were being allocated to those who had made requests for them. Among the plants were several labelled *Aster n.-b. ‘Farncombe Lilac’*. As a few plants were still displaying flowers, it wasn’t difficult to see that they were distinctly different. At that time we had no images of ‘Farncombe Lilac’, so there was uncertainty about the true plant.

With the intention of getting information about the correct identity, I took away an example of each plant in flower, and took photographs of the flower and leaves of each. Fig. 1 shows one specimen with very full, double flowers of a bright lilac pink. Flowers of the second plant (fig.2) clearly show a different colour and form – fewer, pale pink petals and a larger centre. On closer observation I noticed that the leaves were also different: the leaves of the first plant were smooth and dark green, while those from the second plant were longer, paler and had serrations along their edges. With only one entry for *A. ‘Farncombe Lilac’* in the *RHS Plant Finder* at the time there wasn’t much to go on.

The National Collection Holder at Old Court Nurseries was the first person to respond to my request for information. However the images of flower and foliage that we sent didn’t match any that they grew or had records of, so that line of enquiry drew a blank! Fortunately I was put in contact with Alan Whitehead, the person who’d introduced the plant to the scheme. He had bought a plant and felt it worth introducing, but he had no knowledge of its history or provenance. He contacted Blooms of Bressingham and, from the images he sent, Jason Bloom was able to confirm that the plant was indeed ‘Farncombe Lilac’.

Fig. 3 The true ‘Farncombe Lilac’ in Alan Whitehead’s garden.
they had grown it for some years, propagating it on a small scale and distributing it to retailers. However, there were no suppliers listed in the 2014 Plant Finder, which is a pity because the plant of ‘Farncombe Lilac’ I grow in my garden is worth saving: it is much more resistant to mildew than others of its clan, it doesn’t need staking as it doesn’t grow too tall, the flowers are a really clear colour, and there are plenty of them, displayed well against the dark foliage. One of our growers has recently given a plant to Old Court Nurseries, so it will be interesting to see what their assessment is. Fig. 3 shows ‘Farncombe Lilac’ in Alan Whitehead’s garden – so now we all know what it’s supposed to look like! The plant in Fig. 2 is the imposter, and should not be grown under that name.

How does it happen? I don’t think there’s a straightforward answer, but my best guess is that a true plant has been allowed to set seed and has dropped a few into, or on the edge of, an existing clump. When later the plant was divided, the pink one ended up with the label it shouldn’t have. This is the reason why growers taking part in the Scheme are asked to dead-head all the conservation plants before they set seed, as well as propagating only vegetatively.

The second plant – the Helianthus – has proved to be more of a headache, and it’s likely that there are at least two very similar but nevertheless different cultivars in circulation, under a host of different names. Previous growers, Group coordinators, national coordinators and nurserymen and women have identified the plant or plants as, amongst others, HH. ‘Happy Days’, ‘Capenoch Supreme’, ‘Shall we Dance’, x multiflorus pleno Flore Plena, ‘Capenoch Star’, ‘Capenoch Supreme’ syn. multiflorus pleno – I think you get the picture.

(Although H. ‘Capenoch Supreme’ is a recognised name, neither ‘Shall we Dance’ nor ‘Capenoch Supreme’ syn. multiflorus pleno are verified to date.)

The Helianthus I obtained from the Scheme in 2012 grew to just under 2 metres in its first year, flowering profusely from top to bottom (figs 4 & 5). Needless to say I was delighted with the result, especially as even the unopened buds were extremely attractive.

Looking through past records, it appears that two different Helianthus were introduced to the Scheme around 2001–2004, and correspondence about their identities is inconclusive. When I contacted the RHS, as at present there is no Helianthus Collection in the UK, they gave me the contact details of a National Collection Holder in Germany. After he’d seen my photos and descriptions, he wrote back ruling out H. ‘Happy Days’ because...
it's a shorter and more compact plant, despite the fact that the flowers are similar. To add to our confusion further, he was confident that my plant was *H. x multiflorus ‘Meteor’* – yet another name! – and having again looked at images on the internet I think he could be right.

However the situation is made no less perplexing by the internet, because if any of the supposed names are put into a search engine providing images, a host of different flower forms and sizes appear bearing the same name.

To date we are no nearer the correct identity or identities of any of our *Helianthus*, but whatever mine is, it's certainly worth having in the summer border! Several of the previously suggested names have more than 3 entries in the *Plant Finder*, and the conservation plant is so similar to others it raises doubts about whether it should still be in the scheme.

If anyone out there can provide evidence of the true identity of my *Helianthus* I’d love to hear from them.

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Fig. 5 *Helianthus x multiflorus* ‘Meteor’ excels in Helen’s garden – or is this plant really *H. x multiflorus pleno* Flore Plena, *H. ‘Shall we Dance’, H. ‘Capenoch Star’, *H. ‘Capenoch Supreme’? Or something else?

**Helen Mount** gardens on the Isle of Wight, and is the Society’s Conservation Scheme Coordinator. Contact Helen at conservation@hardy-plant.org.uk.

This year Michaelmas daisies – *Aster novi-belgii* – have a new name, *Symphyotrichum*. 
Adventures with seed – the story of a novice

Pauline Cooper has learnt to love collecting and growing from seed.

The arrival of the HPS seed list in November always fills me with excited anticipation. My first Seed List arrived shortly after I joined the Society in 2001. Being able to choose 15 packets of seed for a mere £3.50 seemed too good to be true. But when I opened the catalogue my heart sank: all that botanical Latin meant little to me, as a novice. No helpful descriptions either. I remember sifting through that first catalogue marking the names which rang a bell, such as Campanula, Iris, and Viola. My selection was largely made up of such familiar plants, but also several chosen for no other reason than I liked the sound of their names (figs 1 & 2).

Stearn’s Dictionary of Plant Names for Gardeners threw light on those confusing names, and is still a reference book that I wouldn’t be without. I also bought the RHS A-Z of Garden Plants, which helped with plant descriptions.

A surprising number of the plants listed in the seed list were not to be found in this mighty tome. I now know that much of the seed offered through the Seed Distribution is rare.

Fig. 3 My home-made mouse-proof box has mesh on the bottom, sides and lid. The lid fits very snugly.
Checking through the 2014 Seed List I counted 1,000 names offered by fewer than 10 nurseries listed in *Plant Finder*; 592 were listed by 4 or fewer nurseries; and 176 did not appear at all. How lucky we are to have keen collectors and knowledgeable plantspeople from around the globe who are willing to donate such rarities to our Seed Distribution scheme. How fortunate we are to be able to grow such plants in our own gardens. By doing so we are contributing to the Society’s aims of ‘ensuring that all garden-worthy perennial plants remain in cultivation and have the widest possible distribution’. And I had thought that using the Seed Distribution was about getting cheap seed! (The seed is actually free; we make a payment only towards administering the scheme.)

In recent years, the Seed List Descriptive Database on the HPS website has proved to be a great help when choosing which seed to grow. One of the joys of the Seed Distribution is the eclectic range offered. There is something for everyone, from annuals such as *Calendula officinalis* cultivars and *Orlaya grandiflora* (never enough seed for everyone who requests it) to very rare seed such as *Cotoneaster ganghobaensis* or *Romanzoffia californica* for the keen plant collectors.

The bewildered novice who made that first seed order in 2001 was confronted with the daunting task of sowing the seed. The problem was that each book I read seemed to give a different method. Then in early 2005, Peter Thompson brought to a meeting of our local Shropshire Group a stack of copies of the recently published second edition of his book *Creative Propagation*.
At last help was at hand. And a degree of liberation: no need to wash pots, let alone sterilise them. I learnt that some seed actually needs a small quantity of previously used growing medium, containing bacteria, to germinate and to thrive.

Seeds are a bit like Goldilocks. The moisture content of the compost should be neither too dry, nor too soggy, but just right! Multi-purpose compost is frequently too dry or too soggy, and quite difficult to maintain ‘just right’.

There are many recipes for the growing medium for seed. To simplify life I have developed a ‘one size fits all’ approach, which may horrify some, but works for me.

I use John Innes no. 1 loam-based compost, fairly coarsely sieved to remove lumps, and fill the pots two thirds full. I tap the pot to settle the compost. At this stage I add a plant label on which I have written not only the name of the plant, but also the date of sowing and where I obtained the seed. (I find that Edding 140S OHP marker pens are reliably indelible). Then I put a thin layer of damp Perlite on top of the compost. Larger seed is then placed on this and covered with damp Perlite to nearly fill the pot. For smaller seed I top the pot up with Perlite, then add the seed. Medium sized seed (such as pansies and aquilegia) is ploughed into the Perlite with a dibber to bury it, and very fine seed is sprinkled on top of the topping of Perlite.

Sowing the seed as sparsely as possible makes life simpler at the pricking-out stage. The John Innes compost provides some feed for the roots and the Perlite holds air and just the right amount of moisture around the seed for healthy germination.

Figs 7 & 8 Lychnis cognata and Dianthus knappii flowered in their first year.

Fig. 6 Tulipa sprengeri took five years to flower and was worth the wait.
It also protects young, recently germinated seedlings from damping-off disease. Once the seed is sown, I water the pots from overhead using a very fine rose, and set them outside in my mouse-proof box (fig. 3), in the shade behind the shed.

Another thing I have learnt is that some seed is better sown much earlier than in spring. Many seeds need periods of cold weather before they will germinate. Creative Propagation has chapters dealing with different categories of plants, at the end of which can be found a very useful Propagation Summary. Here is a list of plants with the best time to sow seed or take cuttings. The seed from the Seed Distribution arrives at the end of January, so it is disconcerting to find that some of one’s chosen seed is best sown fresh. I have found that if I sow the seed as soon as I receive it, and put the pots outside in my box, I usually get a satisfactory rate of germination.

Sometimes I like to experiment! In 2011 I bought a small plant of Dactylicapnos lichiangensis (fig. 4) from Winderwath in Cumbria. Believing it to be an annual, I decided to sow some seed for the following year. I sowed one pot in the autumn and put it into my box to over-winter outside. The following spring, two more pots were sown, one in a propagator, the other outside. The seeds which were left out all winter were the only ones to germinate, and to my delight the original plant proved to be perennial. I now send seed of this lovely plant to the Seed Distribution and hope others have had success with it. In 2014 it wasn’t listed in Plant Finder by a single nursery, so it is very deserving of our propagation.

One of the reasons people give for not growing from seed is that it takes too long for the plants to get to flowering size. Indeed some are very slow, and may spend more than a season slowly growing in pots plunged into the nursery bed (fig. 5). I waited five years to see flowers on Tulipa sprengeri (fig. 6) but it was well worth the wait. Others are surprisingly fast. Lychnis cognata (fig. 7) flowered in its first year, as did the lovely, soft-yellow Dianthus knappii (fig. 8).
*Clematis rehderiana* (fig. 9), sown in 2011, was by 2014 cascading over the trellis and proving a mecca for late-summer bees. I am enjoying the wide range of flower colours and markings which seeds of Californian Hybrid *Iris* (fig. 10) have produced, only two or three years after sowing.

I confess that my original motive for sending seed to the Distribution was the lure of extra seed for donors. But the process of collecting seed soon becomes addictive.

Another world opens up watching seedpods develop, and I marvel at the many different forms they take. Collecting seed is a lovely, gentle job for a lazy, warm summer or autumn afternoon.

Some seeds are obligingly easy to collect, and a good starting point for the beginner. The seeds of *Molopospermum peloponnesiacum* (fig. 11) can simply be picked off the plant. The seed capsules of plants such as *Aconitum* (fig. 12) open at the top when the seed is ripe, and it’s just a question of taking a large manila envelope or paper bag to the plant (fig. 13) and tipping the seed into it, then cutting the stem and putting it upside down in the bag for more to fall out as further drying takes place in a warm room. I’ve learnt that it’s essential to write the name of the seed on the bag first, and not assume you will remember each name after you’ve collected seed from half a dozen different plants and taken them indoors. It’s also important to get to the seedpods before the mice, whose favoured delicacy in my garden appears to be *Anemonopsis macrophylla* (fig. 14).
Fluffy seedheads, such as those of *Aster* and *Echinacea*, can hold a lot of sterile seed, so I’m never sure how much viable seed is amongst the fluff. Because of this uncertainty, the Seed Distribution gives a larger helping of such seed.

If you look closely at *Eryngium*, or teasel (*Dipsacus fullonum*) (fig. 15) seedheads, you can sometimes see the seed gently working its way out of the spikey heads. Once left to dry upside down in a paper bag, more seed will follow. On occasion I’ve found seed germinating within the seedhead. Once they’re dry I spread the contents of a bag out on a tray and blow gently. The ‘chaff’ moves more willingly than the heavier seed, making separation easier. Then I put the seed into labelled paper envelopes which I seal and put with a sachet of silica gel in an airtight polythene box. The seed is stored in the fridge, or sent off to the Seed Distribution.

The really fun seeds to collect are those from ballistic seedheads. Most of us when children have enjoyed touching the seed capsules of Himalayan Balsam, jumping back in alarm when the capsule exploded, scattering its seed.
Pauline Cooper believes that one is never too old to learn new skills, but is not sure if that explains how she finds herself in the role of HPS Seed Distribution Coordinator.

Figs 17a, b, c & d
Sinopodophyllum hexandrum is one of my favourite plants. A slowly expanding clump grows near the path to our front door and the observant of our visitors exclaim “What on earth is that?” when they see the luscious (but poisonous) fruit. It’s also fun to extract the seed.

It can become a challenge to outwit the little blighters! Geraniums are the arch experts in this game. The long ‘beaks’ which give cranesbills their common name hold their seed capsules at the base, sitting on the calyx. Touch them when ripe, and the beaks flip the capsule upwards, sending the seed out of sight. A stealthy approach, a quick bag over the head, scissors to cut the stem, and hey presto, success (fig. 16). It’s essential to close the envelope or paper bag to forestall escape, then leave it in a warm place; the sound of exploding seed hitting the sides of the bag is very satisfying.

Then there are the seeds which allow us to relive our childhood joy of getting messy! Seed enclosed in fleshy fruit, such as Sinopodophyllum hexandrum (fig. 17), can be put into a bowl of water and squished. The seed tends to sink, while the flesh rises and can be scooped from the surface. More information about collecting, cleaning, and storing seed can be found on the Society’s website.

Collecting, and growing from seed gives me great pleasure and satisfaction. I hope I have encouraged those of you who’ve felt that the Seed Distribution is not for you to think again. Have a go. You never know where it might lead you!
In 2001 we downsized from a 30m-long garden with plenty of room to experiment to a patio garden. We desperately needed our new home to have a garage and a small extension, which made the final garden area just 5m x 5m. Initially I looked upon this minuscule plot as a challenge. There was a lot of paving, two raised beds, and two huge 8m-tall conifers. The trees cast deep shade over our own and neighbours’ ground and threatened to topple, so down they came the day after we moved in. I kept one of the original raised beds, plus a small metre-square planting area. I had planted up some of the fences with climbers and had a good number of cuttings in pots, so before the building work began I screened off the garden with plastic sheeting, using trellis for support, to prevent cement dust blowing on to my precious plants-in-waiting.

I knew I could definitely plant two of my favourites, *Fatshedera lizei* (fig. 1) and *Arbutus unedo* (fig. 2), which provide evergreen colour and interest throughout the year: *Fatshedera lizei* is the result of *Fatsia japonica* crossed with ivy. My specimen was originally bought as an indoor plant. I discovered that after overwintering it outdoors it could be encouraged to bend away easily from other structures, where it acts as a hanger for clematis.
Moths and wrens love the large leaves and, although I am forever pruning, it is manageable and provides lots of cuttings to sell when I open for pre-booked teas for the NGS in the summer months; also, the flower arrangers at the local church love its large glossy leaves.

If there is one shrubby tree I would encourage owners of small gardens to plant it is *Arbutus unedo*. As I write in January, its tiny red strawberry fruits are still hanging despite the recent heavy rain and wind. Evidently in Portugal, Spain and Corsica the fruit is made into a liqueur, but it’s extremely bitter to eat raw. It has lovely, shiny, laurel-like leaves and produces flowers and fruit at the same time. It is said to have been left behind when the glaciers of the last Ice Age retreated, and is found growing wild in parts of south-west Ireland, Spain, Portugal and France. A member of the *Ericaceae* family, it can live for 400 years, and it’s a boon in any low-maintenance garden. I am lucky that the metre-high shrub I planted 7 years ago has reached nearly 4m and provides both shade for the pond and year-round delight viewed from my kitchen window, as well as much needed height and beautiful bark. As the mature *Arbutus* is now on the bees’ regular flightpath in summer, I’ve put a birdbath on the raised bed so they have both food and drink when they visit.

Additional height is
given by a fig, *Ficus carica* 'Madeleine des Deux Saisons' (fig. 3), and the columnar, space-saver apple ‘Green Rocket’; both have proved prolific fruiters.

Many herbaceous plants don’t like the shade from the strawberry tree, or being crowded out beneath by the vigorous, flourishing penstemons – but I keep PP. *Phoenix Red*, *Vesuvius*, ‘Penshan Plum Jerkun’, ‘Penshan Wedding Day’, and ‘Penshan Charlotte Louise’ to provide much colour, particularly through autumn when other plants are on the wane.

In the sun grow *Heuchera* ‘Green Spice’ and *H. Marmalade’; *Echinacea* ‘Guava Ice’; the Chinese Fountain Grass, *Pennisetum alopecuroides* ‘Hameln’; *Salvia x jamensis* ‘Hot Lips’; and *Salvia microphylla*, Blackcurrant Sage. I find *Cistus x purpureus* ‘Alan Fradd’ a brilliant background for these perennials.

Baths seem to play a large part in our gardens: our old fibreglass one was buried as the base of a fish pond. The goldfish love it and have bred consistently. There is not enough room for pond plants as we have to cover the pond with a grid to stop our three-legged cat from toppling in, but I use old zinc buckets to grow the pond plants I love such as *Pontederia cordata*.

I continue to volunteer for the National Gardens Scheme (NGS) and am glad that I can open the garden for teas, to continue to raise money and make new friends! I’m always amazed how generous visitors and garden owners are with their time and generosity. Combining our nation’s obsession with gardening with the need to support charities, the NGS was formed in 1927. Today over 3,700 gardens open; the majority are privately owned and open only a few times each year. Every garden is different; in every London street, even in the most deprived areas, someone is growing ornamental plants or vegetables in a small space.

As the years pass and arthritis catches up, it’s good to know that I won’t have to sit and watch a large garden deteriorate, but rather I can go out and potter in my tiny plot. It gives me exercise and fresh air, the opportunity to meet new people and keep my brain active re-reading my old gardening notes and browsing through new plant catalogues.

I love my tiny garden but, with severe pressure of space at home, I now also have an allotment. The allotment should mature within a couple of years and if closely planted with a mixture of vegetables, fruit, herbs and flowers it won’t be too much of a physical challenge. But that’s another story.

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**Teresa Farnham** is an Assistant County Organiser for the London National Gardens Scheme. Though trying to retire, she still works as a gardener, lecturer and life coach.
It was shocking to read in *The Times*¹ about the tragic and unexplained death of a 33-year-old gardener. It was reported that doctors at the hospital to which he was taken were baffled by the patient’s multi-organ failure. It was eventually thought ‘more likely than not’ that the handling of *Aconitum* had probably been the cause. Poisoning may occur following ingestion or by picking the leaves without wearing gloves, as the aconitine toxin is absorbed easily through the skin; and although the whole plant is poisonous, it is in the roots where the highest level of poison is found.

It’s thought that the name *Aconitum* comes from the Greek ἀκόυτος meaning ‘without struggle’ and the plant’s toxic capabilities have been known and used for thousands of years – its common names include Monkshood and Devil’s Helmet. Aconite, the tuberous root, has been used to produce arrow poisons for hunting in many countries including Japan, Alaska and the Aleutian Islands. The Chinese have also used it for warfare. Conversely, it has been used in very low doses to treat neuralgia, sciatica and rheumatism, and as an ingredient in homeopathic preparations for a variety of conditions including cold symptoms, heart palpitations and anxiety, though there are conflicting views as to its overall efficacy². Interestingly, it is recorded as being used as a poison in executions, homicides and suicides, and it has been associated with witchcraft.

In Greek Mythology, Medea is thwarted in her attempt to kill Theseus with a cup of wine poisoned with Wolf’s Bane. In *Henry IV Part II*, Shakespeare refers to it as the ‘venom of suggestion’ to break up relationships.

¹ *The Times* 7 November 2014
² Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency website
In the classic horror film *Dracula* (1931) it is used to protect a female character, but once it’s removed she falls prey to the Count. It also makes an appearance in *Ulysses* where James Joyce employs an overdose of aconite to facilitate the suicide of Rudolph Bloom. There are many other allusions to the dark side of this plant in literature, films and, more shockingly, in real life where it has been used to dispose of inconvenient colleagues and relations. On a more positive note, *Aconitum* has been recorded as a food plant of the caterpillars of many moths, and primary food source for the Old World bumblebee *Bombus consobrinus*.

Some gardeners avoid aconitums completely, but there are sound reasons to grow them. Late flowering, they can add rich colour to the border and they make good cut flowers lasting 7–10 days in a vase. Erect, clump-forming, herbaceous perennials with leathery, lobed, ovate, dark green leaves and strong stems, aconitums bear dense, branched panicles of large blue, purple, white, yellow or pink flowers in early and mid-autumn. They thrive best in cool, moist soil but can cope in full sun if soil is improved with well-rotted organic matter and mulched. Although fairly slow growing, once established they are hardy and reliable; it is suggested that once planted they should remain undisturbed and only the removal of dead stems and growth overwinter should be undertaken – perhaps to avoid exposure to the plant’s toxicity. For those not put off by the warnings, an application of a nitrogen-based fertilizer, applied in late spring, is thought to enhance and improve the quality of the flowers; while they are robust, largely trouble-free plants, it is said that they can be subject to powdery mildew and verticillium wilt.

Most gardeners know that *Aconitum* is a poisonous plant which has to be treated with great care, but how many of us appreciate quite how dangerous it can be? For one who was planning to move *Aconitum napellus* and *A. carmichaelii* to more suitable spots in the garden that decision has been put on hold.

**Rachel Raywood** serves on the Southern Counties Group committee. She came late to ‘proper’ gardening, which is now the source of unlimited pleasure tempered by Nature’s wilfulness.
A new disease is affecting aquilegias: downy mildew has laid waste my National Collections, and this year will be make-or-break for the plants. As with many new diseases (think of ebola), this is extremely virulent, killing plants after infecting others around it, and leaving long-lived spores in the soil.

What are the symptoms?

- Plants may have already-infected new spring growth. This SYSTEMIC infection is quite distinctive – leaves are held more erect, with longer leaf stems to leaf surface area, and often foliage is a whiter green than normal (fig 2).
- Leaf edges may curl (up or down). Leaves crumble away, leaving just the main leaf veins. Plants may look sick, blasted, blighted or frazzled.
- Later in the season the signs are different. Infection is spread by spores, so look for yellowy patches on leaves.
- Mottling is angular as it follows the leaf veins, so distinctly different from the variegation seen in leaves of the Vervaneana Group (fig. 3).
- In moist conditions the mildew grows out through the stomata and forms a downy covering on the underside of the leaf, releasing millions of spores (fig. 4). (This isn’t always easy to see, so the yellowy patches are the easiest symptom to spot.)
- Slug slime on your plants may indicate infection, as they graze on the mildew itself (fig. 5).
What should we do?

If systemically infected plants are left in the ground, not only will they die but also, meanwhile, they will infect any plants nearby and probably contaminate the soil with spores which may survive for decades.

Pick off whole leaves with infected yellowy patches and dig up systemically infected plants. Dispose of them by burning. If this isn’t possible, use your local authority green waste collection or bury it your garden at least 50cm (2’) deep. Do NOT add it to your garden compost.

How can we stop it spreading?

It may be that early identification and removal of affected plants (or leaves) may be the only viable ‘control’ for home gardeners, though nurseries may be able to use a systemic fungicide (the mildew grows inside the leaf).

I am compiling an online directory of where Aquilegia downy mildew is found, so if you find any signs, do let me know – even better if you can send a (digital) photo for confirmation. The directory is likely to become an important epidemiological tool, so please support this additional scientific research.

Contact Carrie at carrie.thomas@ntlworld.com

As pictures are so much better at describing symptoms, see the informative images at
www.touchwoodplants.co.uk/aquilegia-downy-mildew.htm
See also Telegraph online
www.telegraph.co.uk/gardening/11406556/Killer-disease-cripples-aquilegia-collection.html
Horticulture Week
Book Review

**What A Plant Knows:**
A Field Guide to the Senses of Your Garden – and Beyond
Daniel Chamovitz

“I never thought of that before!” she said. “In my opinion you never thought at all,” the Rose said in a rather severe tone.

Lewis Carroll *Through the looking-glass*

Like Alice, many people seem to talk to their plants, though few expect a reply. To most of us, plants are alive but zombies, and as inarticulate as the famous house-brick. But we are starting to see that there is more going on in the garden than we used to think.

A few scientists are rethinking plants. In this book, internationally respected botanist Daniel Chamovitz has gently explained what the iconoclast plant scientists are saying about their subject. For a start he asks us to blunt the sharp distinction between green plants and other living things.

Of course plants don’t speak. But in recent years a few botanists have been discussing what they call the ‘awareness’ plants have of where they are and how they are faring, in similar ways that other organisms ‘sense’ their world, and ‘communications’ both within and between individuals¹.

Starting with shortish chapters that have technical details fairly well under control, Dr. Chamovitz reviews up-to-date interpretations of what a plant ‘sees’, ‘smells’, ‘feels’, ‘hears’, what it ‘knows’ about the world it is growing in, and what it ‘remembers’ about what happened to it.

If some or all of this seems silly, that is partly because we have placed *H. sapiens* at the head of Life’s procession, with things less and less like us further and further back – and that puts plants a long way behind.

Conventional scientific language does not encourage our discussing plants in the same language we use, say, for cuddly furry animals, let alone the imaginative language such as ‘Chinese’ Wilson used to describe the struggle in natural vegetation where ‘the exultations of the victors and the groans of the vanquished would be too much for humanity to bear’². However, it is obvious that plants have ‘senses’, and react to their circumstances. They respond to stimuli: that is, they ‘behave’. We tend to play this down, arguing that they don’t ‘think about’ their situations as we do.

Plants don’t up-root and shuffle round the garden Ent-like³ until they find – as the traditional Japanese gardener is said to put it – where they want to grow, but that doesn’t mean that (in some sense) they don’t know that, say, their roots have just received a dose of nutrients, or that one of their branches has just been lopped off. If they didn’t (in some sense) know, they’d probably be dead!

I don’t think it is the plants they grow that are different from ours, but the frame of thinking of those Japanese gardeners. Long ago, in some oriental traditions it was commonly understood not only that plants are alive, but that they are aware. Are there not echoes of this heard by some plant scientists – and horticulturists, and gardeners – that help them think about their subject anew?

Perhaps an aware plant is not many thought-steps from a talking plant – common enough in poetry, fairy stories, and crank literature; but this is not where Dr. Chamovitz is trying to point us. His message is that plants are more complex, and so much more interesting, than we thought, that biologically they do things we and other organisms do (if in different ways), and that, though we are deaf to it, there is a sort of vegetable conversation going on all the time, even in our gardens⁴.

Martin Spray

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¹ An ‘individual’ plant of e.g. *Solidago, Mentha or Sorbaria* is, of course, difficult both to find and to define.
² E. H. Wilson *A naturalist in western China*, 1913.
³ Tolkien’s Middle-earth beings who closely resemble trees.
⁴ *What a plant knows* is not an update of Tomkins & Bird’s interesting but uncritical *The secret life of plants* [1973]. Another part of the recent thinking is Francis Hallé’s *In praise of plants* [2002]. Some of the philosophical roots are explored by Matthew Hall in *Plants as persons* [2011] State University of New York Press.
Genetic protectionism matters

I can clearly remember my primary school teacher trying to interest me and my fellow pupils in the 17th century ‘Acts of Enclosure’, which fenced previously common land and assigned ownership of it to the rich and powerful. I simply could not comprehend the outrage of the ‘commoners’ denied access to resources that had been theirs to use freely from time immemorial.

But now I understand. Over the last two decades, the greatest of all the global commons – biodiversity – has been enclosed stealthily, under the noses of people who care passionately about their rights to liberty, freedom from discrimination and access to clean air. Since the inception of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in 1992, ‘genetic resources’ – bureaucratese for all the design work done by natural selection over billions of years – have become the property of the nation states in which they currently reside.

You and I no longer have a right of access to natural capital1, to the very genes with which we all share a common ancestor. Since the adoption into European law in October 2014 of the Nagoya Protocol, anyone wanting access to genetic resources must personally negotiate prior informed consent and put in place an ‘access and benefit sharing agreement’ with the relevant government.

So onerous is compliance that, since the CBD came into existence, every single major pharmaceutical company in the world has ceased bioprospecting.2 If complying with the CBD is too expensive for big pharma, what chance have small nurseries? My way of life and my mission to inspire enthusiasm for wild plant species and their conservation through cultivation has been outlawed.

So what? During the SARS crisis in the early years of this century, Indonesia refused to allow scientists in the West, who were attempting to develop a vaccine, access to samples of the virus that might have helped save lives. Their grounds for refusal were that the benefits of any vaccine developed with the aid of those samples might not have been ‘fairly’ shared.3 This stuff matters.

The CBD, which began as an attempt by conservationists to rally global action around biodiversity loss, has become a charter for genetic protectionism. It benefits politicians and bureaucrats in developing countries and those institutions in the developed world with sufficiently deep pockets to buy or bribe their way to access natural capital without breaking the law. By making compliance impossible in practice for anyone else, it positively encourages law breaking. By criminalizing the very people most highly motivated to preserve biodiversity, it invites contempt. Demonstrably, it has had no positive impact whatsoever on biodiversity conservation.4,5,6

Members of the HPS should be deeply concerned by these developments. Almost all the plants we grow in our gardens were introduced to cultivation by plant hunters of the past. We have become a critically endangered species. If the bureaucrats have their way, Evolution Plants and every other nursery that specializes in plants grown from wild-collected seed will be out of business a few years from now. Never mind: garden centres will still exist.

George Orwell, 1944

1 Unless you are a citizen of the USA or of Andorra, the only two nations on earth not to have ratified the CBD.
3 Goldin, I., Divided Nations: Why Global Governance is Failing and What We Can Do About It. 2013, Oxford: OUP.
Big interest from small things

The hot sunny days of early September last year were opportunities to have my English Tea Ceremony on the patio, in close proximity to a pale pink version of Linaria purpurea. The long time a bumble spent among its flowers made me home in on these miniature snapdragons. At least, that is what I expected to see.

A closer look revealed several different flower forms: on many flowers the normally single spur, where nectar is stored, had become two or three spurs with a widening of the flower’s ‘face’. A more extreme and rarer modification was five spurs, evenly spaced around the base of the flower which consisted of five similarly shaped petals, also evenly spaced, replacing the normal snapdragon; these flowers also had a tiny central protuberance like a miniature pincushion.

I assumed that such a complete change in floral shape would mean sterility and no nectar. I was wrong – the bumble bees visited the unusually formed flowers in preference to the normal flowers, inserting their proboscises to their full depth into the centre of the pin cushion. One bee which took 9 minutes visiting all the five-spurred flowers on one small flower spike; I wondered if it got five times the amount of nectar.

I have collected and sown the seeds, and await the results. Is this commonplace, or perhaps evolution in the making. Something small can sometimes give big interest.

If any other member has seen similar changes I’d like to learn from them (email booker@loveleebay.co.uk). My garden, on the North Devon coast near Ilfracombe, is open under the NGS and I’m delighted to welcome Hardy Planters, who are the very best sort of garden visitors!

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Sun 26th Apr Norton Priory Runcom WA7 1SX 10:30am-3pm. Free entry to fair. (Gardens optional)
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