



We saw *Lilium monadelphum* on a steep hillside in the Russian Caucasus.

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A gardening life – learning from the wild

Gill Regan

Although I had been interested in plants all my life, I was an absolute novice when I started gardening. Our new garden was three quarters of an acre of flat, flinty clay with two Bramley apple trees, brambles, nettles, thistles and rough grass. Keen to get started, I grew plants from seed and acquired plants wherever I could, then planted them when I had cleared a patch of soil. I usually checked whether they needed sun or shade, but very little else.

From my parents' dry, sandy garden I dug up snowdrops, winter aconites, and *Cyclamen hederifolium*, and planted them under the apple trees where they survived and slowly multiplied. I sowed honesty and *Impatiens glandulifera* seeds and they multiplied and flowered well. But many other plants did not. Slowly I realised that it wasn't enough to just consider sun or shade, other factors needed to be considered.



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Fig. 2 *Fritillaria imperialis* on a hillside in Iran.



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Fig. 1 Seeing a peony thrive on a mountainside in Iran was a revelation – drainage makes a world of difference!



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Fig. 3 *Fritillaria* thriving in the garden with better drainage.

I started reading gardening books and magazines to find out more about what conditions were necessary for particular plants. I joined the HPS and the AGS and over the years became more successful at keeping plants alive. As our family grew up I had more time and money

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Fig. 4 *Galtonia candicans* also benefits.

to spend on my hobby, growing many more plants from seed and buying from plant fairs. I checked in the *RHS Plant Encyclopaedia* before planting, and in general more plants survived. However I still had disappointments and failures.

I enjoyed growing peonies from seed and was delighted to see my first flowers. Sadly, by the following year the peony had died, and I didn't know why. By this time we had started travelling to see plants growing in the wild. In Iran I took a photo of a peony growing under trees on a hillside (fig. 1) and suddenly the penny dropped. We had had a very wet winter after my seedling had flowered, and I realised that its roots had probably rotted in our sticky clay because of poor drainage. So the next time I planted

a young peony I chose a slightly raised area, and that plant has flourished.

We both enjoy our garden enormously and have learned a lot by trial and error. Reading, films, talks and sometimes seeing first-hand how and where plants grow has been the key to growing them more successfully in our garden – I place them in conditions that as far as possible mimic their natural habitat.

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Fig. 5 Moved to the steeper, shadier end of the flint rockery *Lilium monadelphum* thrives.

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Fig. 6 *Daphne cneorum* grows far better on a raised area.

multiplied vigorously, but in my garden they sulked. I had moved some to the base of a tree where they survived, but after seeing where they grew in the wild I moved my bulbs of the yellow form to where the soil drained more readily and they are certainly happier now (fig. 3). *Galtonia candicans* also grew very well in their garden and I collected seed and grew some bulbs but they languished in our heavy soil and eventually died; after seeing them in the Drakensberg Mountains of South Africa I realised drainage was important, and in their new position they are now flowering and spreading successfully in our garden (fig. 4).

The garden is flat, but over the years we have created some raised areas. I moved soil to create a ridge and later added large flints, filling the gaps with grit and compost. This flint rockery is higher

at one end and partly shady and partly sunny. I had grown *Lilium monadelphum* from seed, but once planted in the garden they didn't increase or flower. Two years ago we botanised in the Russian Caucasus and saw this lily growing on a steep hillside (title image), so I moved them to the steeper, shadier end of this flint rockery and Fig. 5 shows the result. Here I also planted *Gentiana lutea*, grown from seed collected in France, which started flowering only after it was moved here. While travelling in the Dolomites we saw *Daphne cneorum* (fig. 6) growing on a bank, so when I acquired a new small hybrid it was put in the same area and now it is covered with flowers in spring. *Ramonda* and *Haberlea* (fig. 7) also enjoy these well-drained, shady conditions. *Lilium pyrenaicum* has grown well on this rockery but with

very few flowers. Having seen it flowering profusely in Alsace in full sun I may move the bulbs to the lower, sunnier end. At this end a *Paeonia rockii* hybrid grows and flowers well each year, as on the opposite side of the bed does one of my favourite peonies, *Paeonia x smothii* (back cover).



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Fig. 7 *Haberlea* also seems to like being on the slope.



Fig. 8 The scree garden before planting.



Fig. 9 *Moltkia coerulea* loves the scree.

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When we saw how successful the flint rockery was for growing some of the plants we had struggled to grow earlier, my husband Peter suggested creating a scree garden for alpines using spare bricks bought as hardcore. Fig. 8 shows it in the early days, built against a north-facing flint wall. I wasn't convinced that

it would work, but after some self-seeders appeared, *Onopordum acanthium* and *Antirrhinum braun-blancetii*, I realised it might be a success after all and started planting. Once it was topped with limestone chippings it looked much smarter and I am delighted with some of the plants that I have been able to grow on

it. We saw *Moltkia coerulea* in the Russian Caucasus (fig. 9), and it is doing well here, along with a *Zaluzianskya* sp. which we had seen in the Drakensberg. In Oregon we saw several *Eriogonum* species and *E. umbellatum* is very happy in this 'scree'. In Yunnan, high in the mountains, we encountered a *Bergenia* sp. (fig. 10).

Before that holiday I had never considered where bergenias come from. It is such an easy, familiar plant and to see it growing as a high alpine was a surprise to me. As a result I decided to try the scree for a spare plant of *B. emeiensis* which I was told wasn't hardy. It is flourishing there (fig. 11) and has survived the last three winters. *Muscaris* sp grown from Turkish seed start flowering in December and

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Fig. 10 *Bergenia* sp. growing as an alpine in Yunnan.

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Fig. 11 *Bergenia emeiensis*, reputed not to be hardy, is flourishing here.

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Fig. 12 I am also trying *Lewisia cotyledon*, seen here on rocks in Oregon.

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Fig. 13 A seedling of *Campanula patula* var. *thrysiflora* disappeared.

are obviously very happy in these surroundings. My latest experimental planting in this area is *Lewisia cotyledon*, which we saw in Oregon (fig. 12), growing on a shady rock, and I might try moving *Allium karataviense* here as we saw it on steep mountain sides in Kazakhstan and it has struggled to survive in the garden. The scree is not a universal solution, however. A seedling of *Campanula patula* var. *thyrsiflora*, which we had seen growing in the Alps, was planted here, flowered (fig. 13), and then died. I had hoped for some self sown seedlings but so far none have appeared.

Over the years Peter has also built two raised beds. The first is partly shaded and *Jeffersonia dubia*, one of my favourite plants, grows well here even though the drainage is not very good. A globularia was planted in this bed and survived, but it

clearly prefers the top of the sunny wall where it creeps along and flowers with abandon just as it does on rocky walls in the Pyrenees (fig. 14). We saw *Erinus alpinus* in the Pyrenees and a white-flowered form seeds freely along the top of this wall. The second raised bed is in full sun and has excellent drainage, much better than the first, because before filling it we asked advice from our AGS group. Here pulsatillas, which I had never had any success with before, are flourishing and self-seeding. Sternbergias photographed in a dry rocky place in Turkey (fig. 15) also enjoy the conditions in this bed.

A plantaholic, over the years I acquired more plants and needed more space to grow them, so gradually more and more of the garden became cultivated. Years before,

when building work on the house was carried out, a large heap of gravel was dumped on a piece of rough ground. Recently I looked at the remains of the gravel heap and realised that this was another planting opportunity, a gravel garden.



Fig. 14 A *Globularia* has survived in the raised bed but clearly prefers the top of the sunny wall, as seen here in the Pyrenees.

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Fig. 15 Sternbergias, shown in Turkey, also enjoy the conditions in this bed.



Fig. 16 *Eremurus regelii* growing on a Kazakhstan hillside, but it doesn't like the gravel garden.

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Here I am trying various alliums grown from wild-collected seed, several different species of dwarf aquilegia, some species tulips, and a small glaucium species which flowered this year and then died. I am hoping seedlings will appear. I have tried two different *Eremurus* but they have not done well. We saw several species in Kazakhstan (fig. 16) so I thought this gravel bed should suit them but I will clearly have to think again. I bought more *Eremurus* plants recently and am trying a different area, a much sunnier spot but still with good drainage. The latest well-drained planting area, a heap of builders' sand and brick rubble, is on a west-facing slope in full sun. Here I am trying small species tulips, similar to *Tulipa humilis* that we saw growing in the Lake Van area

of Turkey, and other small alpines such as *Origanum* 'Kent Beauty' which in the past I have tried to grow without success.

Woodland plants are among my favourites. Over the years, trees and shrubs that we planted have grown up to provide part or full shade (fig. 17). Here hellebores, trilliums, polygonatums, ferns and many other plants thrive. I planted *Lilium martagon* and *Trillium kurabayashii* many years ago and both have spread and are seeding around. After seeing *Trillium grandiflorum* in woodland in Ontario I tried unsuccessfully to grow it. Advice in books says 'plant in moist, free-draining soil'. Our clay soil may be moist but is not free draining. I realised that as leaves fall in the autumn and rot they add humus to the soil and

improve the drainage, so I made several little raised beds adding spent compost or leaf mould in semi-shade where erythroniums and other woodland plants thrive. *T. grandiflorum* flowered for the first time last year in a similar bed against a north wall. In China we saw several different species of another of my favourite genera, *Paris*. *P. polyphylla* (fig. 18) was growing in shady woodland in the wild and last year in this same bed in our garden a plant flowered for the first time. *P. incompleta*, which we saw in the Russian Caucasus, is also spreading well here. We have not seen *P. japonica* in the wild, and I am still trying to find a place in the garden where it will thrive. The first two plants I bought died after planting so the third plant was bulked up in a pot over several years and eventually planted out.

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Fig. 17 Trees and shrubs provide part or full shade for my favourite woodland plants.

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Fig. 18 *Paris polyphylla* grows in shady woodland in the wild and has now flowered in the garden.



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Fig. 19 *Kniphofia caulescens* grows in bogs in the Drakensberg but likes our flint rockery.

To my delight it flowered the next year but the following year it didn't flower and looked most unhappy, so back it went into a pot, hopefully to recover before I try a different spot in the garden.

Over time my plant addiction resulted in more plants languishing in pots for want of a home. Peter pointed out that a dwarf viburnum that flowers very sparsely was taking up a lot of space, so last year I got rid of it and a large new shady area approximately three metres across on a slight slope was the result. I piled on a lot of homemade compost and in no time had filled the whole space with several different species of polygonatum, lilies, peonies and other choice woodlanders. I may try planting the *Paris japonica* here, and also a recently acquired *Anemone obtusiloba*.

It is surprising when plants that you have seen



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Fig. 20 *Trollius europaeus* on a sunny steep hillside in the Dolomites.



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Fig. 21 *Cyclamen repandum* found a dry sunny spot by itself.



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Fig. 22 A yellow form of *Glaucium flavum* in Turkey.



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Fig. 23 *Glaucium flavum* (yellow form) died in our scree bed but appeared in a raised vegetable bed two years later.



Fig. 24 A pile of hardcore is home to self-seeders.

in the very early days, long before I recognised the need to consider drainage, so I found it very surprising to see it growing on a steep hillside in full sunshine in the Dolomites (fig. 20).

Sometimes plants that you struggle to keep alive seem magically to find the right conditions to survive and grow well. We saw *Cyclamen repandum* growing in Sardinia and subsequently I sowed seed in the greenhouse. A seedling appeared, not in the pot but in a crack in a building block, and it grew to flowering size. It

was impossible to remove the tuber, and then the greenhouse blew away in a storm and that was the end of this plant, or so I thought. Several years later, my eye was caught by a flash of purple at the base of a conifer on our south-facing boundary. When I went to investigate, to my astonishment I found a single plant of this cyclamen and Fig. 21, taken last year, shows this plant and its progeny. Clearly it is very happy growing in this dry sunny spot much like its native habitat. Fig. 22 shows a plant of the yellow form

of *Glaucium flavum*. We had seen it growing in Turkey, so I thought a spot in the scree bed would suit it, but sadly it died. Two years later several plants appeared and flowered in a raised vegetable bed topped with home produced compost (fig. 23).

Fig. 24 shows the remains of a pile of hardcore bought so long ago. Various plants have self-seeded here and I have planted a very small area. If only I were twenty years younger – I would attack this ‘mountain’, clear off all the ivy and periwinkle, and cover it with the plants that we see on our travels and want to grow. I dream of having my own mountain in the garden!

Over the years my passion for plants has not diminished. We realise how lucky we are to have been able to travel all over the world to see plants growing in the wild. There are still many plants we have seen and would like to grow, among them *Ranunculus lyallii* in New Zealand, *Paraglazelia anemonoides* in Yunnan and *Potentilla nitida* in the Dolomites. And there are still places that we would like to explore: this year we hope to botanise in Peru and Sichuan. 

Gill Regan was interested in British wild flowers from an early age. After retirement, with family off their hands, she and her husband have been to many places in the world to see and photograph plants in their native environment. They give talks about these trips and also about their garden, which has featured in some HPS visits and is open through the National Garden Scheme.