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The promise of things to come: *Muscari macrocarpum* 'Golden Fragrance' and pulsatilla emerging; *Iris* 'Purple Gem' in full flower but fading into the background in dull light.

Early to mid-March 2014

Spring has sprung; the ladybirds who overwintered in the corners of my window-frame are stirring, so I've opened the windows for them to adventure out.

I live on the southern flank of a hillside in north-west Hampshire. We bore the brunt of the gales last winter, with horizontal rain finding its way through some window-frames. Thankfully no waterlogged borders here – it's not far down to the chalk.

This winter I dug out the tiny strip of soil along the front of my house and added a few bags of grit and John Innes No. 3. The bed is sandwiched between a concrete walkway and the brick wall, facing south. I've never had a better spot for growing sun-lovers, so the trials have begun.

Already in place were *Clematis* 'Frances Rivis' and a rich-red antirrhinum which has overwintered twice. Everything else, barring a couple of alliums which dodged my spade, was cleared out.

New additions are *Gladiolus* 'Ruby', a *papilio* hybrid; dark-red-leaved and -flowered *Sedum ussuriense* 'Turkish Delight'; a deep-red bearded iris, *Iris* 'Sultan's Palace'; and *Fascicularia bicolor* which has steadfastly refused to die on my travels over several years. Yes, definitely a red theme.

New bulbs were planted before Christmas; now *Iris* 'Purple Gem' is in flower, then *Muscari macrocarpum* 'Golden Fragrance' will take over, flowers emerging grey-blue and just starting to turn yellow – I haven't managed to lower my nose sufficiently to test their scent. *Tulipa humilis* 'Persian Pearl' will be next. Two *Pulsatilla vulgaris* (one default blue/purple and one *rubra*) are already flowering beautifully.

My holy grail – five *Amaryllis belladonna*, overwintered in my shed in a bucket of sand and potted up a month ago, were planted out on as fine a Saturday as you could wish for in June, let alone March. They are hard against the brick wall at the back, so fingers crossed.

Lessons learned from a sunny little patch

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End of March to early April 2014

A new star appears in the constellation: *Scilla peruwiana* var. *venusta* (thank you, Julian Sutton of Desirable Plants) is shoe-horned in between the amaryllis. Two fat buds, filled with promise... dampened by the drizzle.

The tulips are in flower, but since a sunny day in early March their blooms have stayed closed, despite slowly rising to a lofty 10cm. 'Humilis' describes them well: on just one day have I managed to look into their yolk-yellow throats. Once the bulbs are over, I have a significant gap in flowering which needs a solution.



Tulipa humilis 'Persian Pearl'

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Sedum ussuriense 'Turkish Delight' with *Tritelia laxa* 'Koningin Fabiola' and *Dianthus* 'Devon Arctic Star'



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Gladiolus 'Ruby'



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Clematis 'Frances Rivis'

Late June to August 2014

A spankily hot June and things have moved on: new, glaucous gladioli stems are appearing some distance from the main clump, as I had been warned. I'm happy for this to continue for now. The scillas have finished flowering but are still a green presence, putting my amaryllis to shame as they slowly rot away. I have discovered that adding grit to a heavy, clayey soil does not necessarily produce good drainage – I now have a good, moisture-retentive soil, which I can only conclude is unsuitable for my cherished amaryllis. I will have to try again.

The old red antirrhinum is flowering above its small offspring; the dianthus are flowering prettily, as is *Tritelia laxa* 'Koningin Fabiola', who seems happy in my clay-over-chalk. *Daucus carota* 'Black Knight' is budding up, and *S. u.* 'Turkish Delight' is extending greeny-purple stems. A new addition, *Clematis* 'Rouge

Cardinal', on a post with chicken wire, has been chewed (I don't think it's slugs as the bite marks are so small) but has managed a couple of very beautiful, damaged flowers.

Very new *Penstemon* 'Raven' is about to flower; *I.* 'Sultan's Palace's leaves are starting to brown without having flowered this year. The dreaded *Centaurea montana* I thought I'd removed many times keeps pushing up new leaves. And the fascicularia just sits there.

Early August, and temperatures are just beginning to drop as heavy rain showers become more common. The amaryllis have all given up the ghost. The wild carrots are big and a muddy pinky brown colour, not at all what you'd expect from their name. Allegedly they are wonderful as a foil in the vase, but in this little border they have not helped the mix.

The dianthus have remained microscopic. The sedum is elongating prettily.

Autumn to winter 2014

Penstemon 'Raven' is flowering on Christmas Day. I think its form so much better than 'Garnet': I hate to say anything negative about a plant which works its socks off, but in fertile soil 'Garnet' sprawls while 'Raven' stays upright. The charms of *S. u.* 'Turkish Delight' are slightly undone by the excessive length of its stems; though small, perhaps it is a candidate for the Chelsea chop.

The amaryllis I had thought lost have all sprouted healthy green leaves! They must need more time to establish.

I. 'Purple Gem' is in bloom on 25th February; not a bad record, no more than two months without flower. Amaryllis and scilla foliage has persisted through the winter. Cats are deterred using various trowels and forks, stuck into the ground with fear lest I carve up little bulbs.

Early March 2015

Trusty *pulsatillas* emerge looking like little bunny ears.

Old dianthus, which I moved, have become more and more bedraggled and will go! The new miniature ones are slowly clumping up. The first glimpses of purple are visible in my humble tulips, 'Frances Ravis' is shooting like mad, and some early muscari are out.

Mid-October 2015

As a professional gardener and garden creator, I am keenly aware of the tension between the dictates of design and the love of plants for their own sake. At work I tend to favour the former as few of my new clients have the years of gardening required to become ensnared by this particular addiction. But at home my task is more arduous as I am obsessed. Well, there is virtue in aiming high.

We have enjoyed a week or more of wonderful sunny days and cool crisp nights, billed as our Indian Summer and very welcome. I note the first heavy dew on the lawn and the car windows each morning, though

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In a warm sunny spot against the brick wall, *Amaryllis belladonna* has produced only foliage

the forecast is for wind and rain next week.

My little plot has been revitalised by a burst of activity one afternoon. I have been too fond of the rich plums and burgundies in this small space, so I've complained to myself as I arrived home each summer evening to be greeted first by *Clematis* 'Rouge Cardinal', then by tall *P.* 'Raven', and *S. u.* 'Turkish Delight' dominating the colour scheme, not helped by the fact that little else has been blooming here recently. So 'Raven', who had hogged the sunlight over *P.* 'Stapleford Gem' and 'Sultan's Palace', causing them to sulk all summer, was moved out. Dusky-blue *Clematis x durandii* has taken the place of 'Rouge Cardinal' – such a pleasing plant. And a little research shows it's interesting and unusual!

At the other end of the bed, exciting news: a new osteospermum, beloved of my late mother and never tried outside by me before, instead of the dead antirrhinum. Behind it, after taking out a few wandering corms of neighbouring gladioli, I have just enough room for a *Vitex agnus-castus*, a Chaste Tree). I had hitherto only heard of it as a dietary supplement, but on display at Godfrey & Son (other wholesale nurseries are available, but surely few so inspiring), it was very eye-catching.

With this shift-about, I was able to move my long-suffering dwarf dianthus to the front of the bed.

Seedlings of *Digitalis ferruginea*, whose parent I'd swooned over, were planted out everywhere this year; and though I still love them, as with everything else, placement and context are of key importance.

At the back, next to the wall, my fascicularia remains resolutely cheerful with new barbed leaf rosettes, but denies me any flower – I hold no grudge, and will be pleasantly surprised by any unexpected developments.

The amaryllis are still there too, green leaves shooting but again no flower. I have concluded that more (perhaps much more!) time is required, entirely appropriate to the pursuit of the Holy Grail.

January 2016

We are in a week of hard frosts, the first real cold this winter. The digitalis seedlings threaten to crowd everything out but I have left them for now. I'm not sure if my vitex has survived, but the osteospermum looks perfectly happy. The amaryllis leaves are bigger than ever, and I conclude that time here is the crucial ingredient – is there greater joy in witnessing the eventual blossoming, or in anticipation of it? I will leave that to the HPG (Hardy Philosophy Group) to argue over. 🌸

Souren Ala waits in hope for his amaryllis to do the honours.