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## President's perspective – plants, people, places

Roy Lancaster

Fig. 1 *Prunus* 'Pink Shell' one of the best trees of its kind for small gardens.

Writing these words on a cold and crisp but bright sunny January day under a blue cloud-free sky, I feel I have every reason to look forward to another year of gardens and gardening, and meetings with plant lovers and plants, especially given that this is the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary year of our great Society. All these pleasures should be a reliable and continuing source of optimism in our lives, whatever the headlines and dire predictions in the daily news. Only yesterday, following a night when the temperature in my garden sank to  $-5^{\circ}\text{C}$ , I was astonished to watch the hoar frost melting from the flowers of a mahonia leaving them unharmed and apparently eager to continue their cheerful display. This particular mahonia, with its bold ruff of white-backed leaves, is as yet unnamed and unavailable in the trade, but hopefully in the not too distant future it may well be more widely known.

A great deal of my time last year was spent on preparing a new book<sup>1</sup> about my life with

plants. It seriously affected our usual programme of activities but, on a personal level at least, it gave me an excuse to wander down memory lane revisiting past travels and experiences, both domestic and overseas. Fortunately I am like a squirrel when it comes to recording and storing things, and I had the benefit of notebooks, journals and scrapbooks going back to the 1950s to help jog my memory. When it came to illustrations, black and white prints, colour transparencies and, for the past eight years, digital images in their thousands were at my disposal. Luckily we have Jennifer Harmer, the Society's Historian and Archivist on our doorstep, and over a period of several weeks she kindly helped me by scanning selected images, mostly transparencies, to send to my publisher.

A visit to the Winter Garden at The Sir Harold Hillier Gardens on a windy day in March had me sniffing the air in expectation, and sure enough the sweet, powerful

scent of *sarcococcas* was immediately apparent. Several species and selections of these small, hardy evergreen shrubs have been planted here, but on the day I was drawn to a familiar drift of *S. hookeriana* 'Ghorepani' (fig. 2), whose characteristic erect habit and narrow shining green foliage are a decided bonus while the crowded axillary clusters of white stamens with prominent red anthers are produced in generous quantities and attract early bees.



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Fig. 2 *Sarcococca hookeriana* 'Ghorepani' has proven it deserves its AGM.

<sup>1</sup>Editor's note: *My Life with Plants* is reviewed on page ?

It was originally introduced from a mountainside near the Nepalese village of that name by Chris Grey-Wilson and Barry Phillips in 1973, and it well deserves its subsequent Award of Garden Merit.

The following month I particularly remember for a visit to John and Elizabeth Ravenscroft's garden at The Old Rectory, near Hodnet in Shropshire, which is most notable at this time of year for its wide selection of spring-flowering trees and shrubs, especially magnolias and viburnums as well as bulbs,

perennials and cherries. A short drive away, John's rapidly developing arboretum is already well known to fellow dendrologists and gardening friends, though sadly not to the general public. From there we called in at Wollerton Old Hall, stopping at the garden's entrance to admire the most perfect and shapely crown of the beautiful cherry, *Prunus* 'Pink Shell' (figs 1 & 3), its slender arching branches wreathed with delicate, pink-clouded, cup-shaped blooms. It is one of the best of its kind for small gardens. Inside

the garden, which I had first visited many years ago in its infancy, my plantsman's eye was attracted to *Parrotiopsis jacquemontiana* (fig. 4), a large shrub or small tree from the W. Himalaya with white-bracted, yellow-stamened flowers which at a glance remind one of a flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*), but are smaller. Surprisingly, it is a member of the *Hamamelis* family and is represented by this single species which I once saw growing above streams and rivers in Kashmir.

From Wollerton it was an hour's drive to Ashwood Nursery to see John Massey's garden. As usual I filled several pages of my notebook with the names of desirable plants, of which the most charming was *Trillium rivale* (fig. 5), which I have long known but never grown. Native to cool, shady stream- and riversides in the Siskiyou and Klamath Mountains of SW Oregon and NW California, this choice little perennial up to 15cm high had been planted in a sheltered,



Fig. 3 *Prunus* 'Pink Shell'.



Fig. 4 *Parrotiopsis jacquemontiana* looks like a flowering dogwood but is a member of the *Hamamelis* family.



Fig. 5 *Trillium rivale* seeds itself around at Ashwood Nurseries.

well-drained pocket on John's rock garden where it had spread to form a substantial patch. The typically 3-petaled, inclined to nodding, flowers were white with the faintest flush of pink. It was originally given to John by Elizabeth Strangman some 15 years ago. He had added well-rotted leaf mould to the soil mix which obviously suited the trillium; it has since spread its roots into the cool depths beneath a nearby boulder and is seeding around. Incidentally, this year (2017) Ashwood Nurseries is celebrating its 50th anniversary, an occasion all hardy planters will have reason to welcome.

I never cease to be surprised at the exceptional plants being grown, often in unexpected places, sometimes under one's nose. An outstanding example of this I saw in late April in the rear garden of a bungalow hidden away in a small cul-de-sac within walking distance of my home in Chandlers Ford. I had received a phone call from the owner reminding me of a conversation we had had in

a local supermarket, inviting me to come and see a special plant, a lady's slipper orchid: it was now in flower and at its best. I dropped what I was doing and headed his way. He was waiting by the gate and without further ado led me to the rear of the bungalow, there to see an impressive colony of *Cypripedium formosanum* (fig. 6), a Taiwan endemic, flourishing in a large pot. I was truly stunned by this beautiful plant which he had been growing for several years. Nor was it the only interesting plant he had established in his garden, which had me wondering what other plant surprises might be lurking in my neighbourhood.

A new addition to my garden this year was *Lysimachia fordiana* (fig. 7). Introduced from Sichuan, China by Mikinori Ogisu, this dwarf perennial seems most closely related to *L. paridiformis*, represented in cultivation by the outstanding subspecies *stenophylla* from which it most noticeably

differs in the fewer, broader leaves surrounding the compact, dense, terminal inflorescence. The leaves of *L. fordiana* possess more of a matt surface compared with the shining surface of *L. paridiformis*. The flowers too are a slightly darker shade of yellow, borne on slender stalks to form a looser terminal head. It also appears to be less hardy and, having lost one outside to winter wet, I am growing a replacement in a container, keeping it under glass over winter until I can increase it to provide plants to experiment with elsewhere in my garden. Like *L. paridiformis* var *stenophylla*, I suspect *L. fordiana* will prove wintergreen in a sheltered spot. It was at its best flowering in June, while with me *L. p.* var. *stenophylla* flowers in July.

A visit in June to the Garden Festival at the Bishop's Palace in Wells, Somerset, was a first for me and I was rewarded with a most enjoyable tour of the garden by head gardener James Cross who, with a small



Fig. 6 *Cypripedium formosanum* grown in a large pot.



Fig. 7 *Lysimachia fordiana*.



but enthusiastic team of staff and volunteers, is working wonders with perennial and woody plants in a pleasing and imaginative way, including a relatively new and impressive Mediterranean border beneath the palace wall (fig. 8). On the outer (apron) walls I was amazed to find maidenhair fern, *Adiantum capillus-veneris* (fig. 9), well established and sprouting from crevices between the ancient stones. It seemed to me an unlikely site for this delicate shade- and moisture-loving species, rare in Britain where it is normally found in maritime limestone cliffs and rock crevices in the

west. So how came it to Wells, and when?

More unusual perennials were waiting for me at Abbotsbury Subtropical Gardens in Dorset in August. Steve Griffith, the curator, could hardly wait to show me *Lobelia excelsa* in flower; I had once seen this tall-growing, leafy species from Chile growing beneath wine palms in the arid hills above Santiago, growing with *Puya chilensis* and *P. berteriana*, both of which are represented at Abbotsbury. Just as exciting to me was Steve's next surprise: *Musschia wollastonii* (fig. 10),

a spectacular monocarpic perennial endemic to Madeira, mainly along the island's north coast. Its first-year growth results in a massive mound of downy leaves followed the next year by an equally impressive conical multi-branched head up to 1.5m or more of greenish-yellow flowers. Sadly, having flowered it then dies, though not before producing abundant seed. I have never attempted to grow this plant in my less sheltered garden, but that did not deter me last year from trying another striking plant with a name to match: *Brillantaisia owariensis* (fig. 11), a shrub or subshrub from tropical Africa. Its 2-lipped, striking blue flowers and rugged heart-shaped leaves give it the look of a giant salvia but it belongs to the *Acanthus* family. It flowered for me in late summer but was cut to the ground by the first frosts, and I can't wait to see if it regrows this year.

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Fig. 8 The Mediterranean border at Bishop's Palace, Wells.

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Fig. 9 *Adiantum capillus-veneris* on the walls at Bishop's Palace, *Asplenium trichomanes* below.

Should it not, then I shall be relying on my green-fingered friend Richard Duke to replace it with a plant grown from cuttings he has rooted from a plant grown under glass. It is certainly worth persisting with. Remember the name!

Visiting Great Dixter in September, the first time in years, I was taken aback by the range of desirable perennials in bloom which included many of my favourites – *Kniphofia rooperi* (fig. 12) like a long-necked, extravagantly crowned bird is just one example, while a combination planting in a raised footpath border of *Dianthus* ‘Neon Red’ and *D.* ‘Neon Purple’ with silver-leaved *Plectranthus argentatus* was similarly stunning (fig. 13). The biggest surprise, however, was a chance meeting with Beverley Merryfield, a hardy planter from Vancouver with whom I once stayed when speaking at a perennial symposium some years ago.

She told me she had timed her visit in order to attend a talk I was giving that evening in the Great Hall at Dixter. Needless to say, we had plenty to talk about.

Flowering for me the first time in September was *Tibouchina paratropica* (fig. 15), a delightful slender-stemmed dwarf shrub with hairy leaves and flights of white, 5-petalled flowers with a faint pink flush, which continued to appear over several weeks. It was given to me by a friend at RHS Garden Rosemoor where it is claimed to be hardy in a warm, well-drained, sheltered border. I have kept mine in its pot on the patio but transferred it to my cool greenhouse when the temperatures began to fall and the soft shoot tips were damaged by frost. I suspect it might behave as an herbaceous perennial in warm gardens, but I was not taking

any chances. To those familiar with the royal purple, large-flowered *T. urvilleana* of warm conservatories this dwarf South American native might seem a pallid alternative, but I believe it does have a future.

I always look forward to my visits to The Savill Garden in Windsor Great Park and towards the end of September, in a whole bed planted with perennials, the still performing hardy grass *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Ferner Osten’ and the less hardy *Cuphea cyanea* and *Dahlia* Happy Days Lemon presented a winning trilogy (fig. 16), well worth copying on a smaller scale in gardens of more modest size. Down by the lake, meanwhile, I encountered a strikingly effective planting of *Ligularia fischeri* var. *megalorhiza* ‘Cheju Charmer’ (fig. 17), bold in flower and foliage especially when viewed as here against the glass-like surface of the water.



Fig. 10 *Musschia wollastonii* and Stephen Griffith at Abbotsbury.



Fig. 11 *Brillantaisia owariensis*, from tropical Africa, flowered for me in late summer but was cut to the ground by the first frosts. I can't wait to see if it regrows this year.

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Fig. 12 *Kniphofia rooperi* at Dixter. One of my many favourites.

It is a Crûg Farm collection from the island of Jeju or Cheju off the SW coast of South Korea. A pity about the rather cumbersome name which must have had the label engraver on overtime.

My bi-annual visit to the Journee des Plantes (now at Chantilly) in October brought the now expected rush of interesting and new



Fig. 13 *Dianthus* and *Plectranthus argentatus* made another stunning combination.

plants including a sprightly Michaelmas daisy of Korean origin. *Aster scaber* 'Kasumi' is an erect, clump-forming herbaceous perennial to 90cm or so, with slender leafy stems sporting diversely branching heads of small but prettily poised pale daisy flowers. It has an extended flowering period and in its homeland it is also used as a vegetable in

stir fries, etc. It is said to have a pleasant bitter taste and a distinctive aroma. Make of that what you will. I bought one for my garden and it was still flowering well into November. I also spotted 'an old friend' in *Elsholtzia stauntonii*, a low, sub-shrubby member of the mint family (*Lamiaceae*) with an odour to match. I first saw it in 1960 when I was a student at the Cambridge University Botanic Garden, and I was quite taken with its freely borne panicles of lilac-purple flowers produced over a long period from late summer into autumn. It can also be treated as an herbaceous perennial, and is suitable for most any soil in full sun.

Finally, an apology. I have mentioned in a previous article a splendid white-flowered stock in my garden which I collected in 2002 as seed from a plant growing on the cliffs on the north coast of the island of Madeira.



Fig. 14 The long border at Great Dixter in September.



Fig. 16 *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Ferner Osten', *Cuphea cyanea* and *Dahlia* Happy Days Lemon still performing well in late September at The Savill Garden.

These cliffs are famous for their endemic plants including the Madeiran stock, *Matthiola maderensis*, which is common there though usually with lilac to pale-violet coloured flowers. Over the years I have given both seed and plants of my stock to visitors and local plant fairs under the name *M. maderensis* White Form (it comes true from seed), until last year when I began to have doubts about its authenticity. I sent specimens in fruit to James Armitage, senior taxonomist at RHS

Wisley, and he was able to confirm my suspicions that my plant was simply a white form of *M. incana* (fig. 18), which is also found wild in Britain. The probability is that seeds from a garden stock in the coastal village of Porto Moniz somehow found its way into populations of the native *M. maderensis*. It was past flowering at the time of collection. I would love to try seed of the real McCoy should anyone grow it, though the chance of its proving hardy with me is questionable.



Fig. 15 *Tibouchina paratropica*, thought to be hardy in north Devon but in my cold greenhouse over winter.



Fig. 17 *Ligularia fischeri* var. *megalorhiza* 'Cheju Charmer'.



Fig. 18 What I believed was *Matthiola maderensis* I now know to be *M. incana*.

Meanwhile, I shall continue growing, admiring and sharing my splendid hoary stock both for its heavenly scented white flowers in summer and its bold mounds of grey foliage in winter. 🌿

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