

Plant of the Month: *Saxifraga* 'Shiranami'

Joe Sime

I struggled to find something both new and in good condition this month. Autumn has come early to our garden due jointly to low temperatures in September and a dry spell on top of a very dry summer. The *Tricyrtis* are flowering without much enthusiasm and the summer dormant plants are putting up fresh leaves and then wondering whether it was a good idea after all. However the *fortunei* type saxifrages are putting on a decent show and so I have chosen one of these, *Saxifraga* 'Shiranami'.



Marian Goody wrote an excellent piece on these plants in the March edition and so I will keep this short. I had grown one or two planted out into the garden for several years. They grew well enough but did not make much of an impact. They flower late and the foliage does not stand out well against the black/ brown of the soil. However, seen in pots they look stunning, and so I decided to provide them with a raised bed situated where we would pass them daily. I ordered eight different varieties from Edrom Nurseries and collected them at a local Plant Fair that they were attending. The bed was planted up in September 2016. The original plan was *fortunei* saxifrages and miniature hostas, but the hostas have all been eaten by slugs. The saxifrages however have survived and are beginning to look good against a top dressing of light coloured gravel. 'Shiranami' is a lovely little variety with pure white, ragged, double flowers over fresh green lobed leaves. I am now slowly buying more saxifrages to fill in the gaps left by the hostas. The only problem is that many are very late into leaf and one tends to spend April and half of May wondering whether the little treasures have survived.

Studies in green and blue:

Tim Longville

One of the mysteries of gardening – certainly of gardening in Britain - is the number of plants with obvious and unusual virtues which nevertheless are seldom seen in British gardens. Take the genus *Strobilanthes*, for example. What could be more usefully attractive than a plant tough enough to cope even with dry shade and root-infested soil, vigorous enough to cover a considerable area with good-looking weed-suppressing foliage and producing at an unusual time of year for a shade-loving plant (late summer into and through much of autumn) a profusion of striking tubular flowers (most often in one of an almost infinite number of shades of blue though there are also species with flowers in white and pink)?

So why aren't they used more in British gardens? The answer is simple. Because many of the members of this large genus (it contained around 350 species at the last count, though new species are still being discovered) are simply not possible here in the open garden. That's because they come from areas with truly tropical climates, such as Myanmar or Madagascar. As a result, gardeners have often tarred the whole genus with the same brush, as 'mere house-plants'.

Those tropical species are indeed mostly grown indoors, as exotic-looking foliage plants. *S. dyeriana*, the Royal Purple Plant or Persian Shield, is the best known. *S. anisophyllus* is another – though at least one British enthusiast has tried that, with limited success, in the ground. (See www.johnjearrard.co.uk.) Certainly, these species from tropical climates would only be feasible outdoors in the most sheltered corners of Cornwall or the Scillies, and perhaps not even there.

On the other hand, there are a good many other species, from more temperate areas, such as parts of Japan, China and Taiwan, which are hardy under most British conditions during most British winters. (Do note the cautious repetition of 'most' in that sentence!) Yet few British gardeners grow them, though Dr Stewart Wright, head horticulturalist at Hoveton Hall on the edge of the Norfolk Broads, has a good collection, and relatively few British nurseries stock them. As you'd expect, Crûg Farm stocks more than anyone else but even the Wynn-Joneses don't stock all of the species worth trying. For a closer approximation to that much-to-be-desired condition you have to have discovered a remarkable nursery in north-eastern France, of which more later.

What follows is, first, a discussion of the species I grow myself and then an indication of some other species which sound well worth attempting if, and it's a considerable if, they can be tracked down. I should emphasise – not, I daresay, that it needs emphasising! – that I write as a gardener not as a botanist, and as a purely or impurely amateur gardener at that.



The best known of the hardy strobilanthes is probably *S. wallichii*, which is a bold plant to a metre or so tall and at least as much across, with fresh green leaves and sizeable trumpet-shaped blue flowers appearing profusely over a considerable period all along the main stems. One website compares the flowers to the 'horns' of old-fashioned gramophones, as in the classic His Master's Voice advertisement. It relishes shade and though it grows better in soil which doesn't dry out it will cope with a surprising amount both of dryness and of root-competition. Like several other *Strobilanthes*, it tends to root whenever a node touches the ground – a characteristic which is useful or painful

depending on your style of gardening. Here, though the flower-colour is most often simply a good deep blue, some plants do produce bi-coloured flowers, the tube being white, the lips blue. I wonder if this is what that French nursery I mentioned describes as *S.* 'Blue Lips', tout court, with no species name preceding the cultivar one?



The website of a British enthusiast, at www.bensbotanics.co.uk, describes the variation in flower-colour among specimens of *S. wallichii* in very similar terms to mine here.

The next species came to me years ago without a name. It was a gift from a retired farmer in North Devon, who as well as making sculptures out of redundant farm machinery with which to decorate his impressive large-scale wild garden, had also volunteered at Rosemoor when that garden was still owned by Lady Anne Palmer. Rosemoor was the source of this plant, so may have been one of Lady Anne's own collections. I've always thought of it as *S. attenuata*, since descriptions of that species seemed to come closest to it as it performs here. *S. attenuata* is smaller in leaf and flower but even more vigorous and free (and long) flowering than *wallichii*. Its growth-habit is also essentially much lower but it also loves to scramble into or simply up any suitable host, whether shrub, tree or wall. As a result, a single plant here has spread over a couple of metres of ground and by the end of the season is up to a



metre and a half high against the wall behind it. It also, like *S. wallichii*, roots as it goes. Here it has draped itself down a low retaining wall at the front of the bed and happily rooted into the gravel path below. That sort of do-it-yourself propagation is ideally suited to my own, ahem, informal style of gardening but may not, even in a woodland context, suit everyone else's; you have been warned.

(www.bensbotanics.co.uk describes the differences between the two species much as I've done here. And if this plant isn't *S. attenuata*, I've at the moment no alternative identity to suggest for it.)

My third species is *S. penstemonoides*. This plant from Himalayan forests is for me a fairly recent acquisition from the late and much-missed Michael Wickenden of Cally Gardens, Gatehouse of Fleet. In 'gardener terms', it is in effect a half-way house between *S. wallichii* and (the supposed) *S. attenuata*, smaller than the former, bigger than the latter, less free-flowering and less vigorous than either, though that may be because of its unpromising position here, shaded by the foliage and out-competed by the roots of a tree-sized *Olearia virgata* var. *lineata*. Its flowers are a lighter blue than those of the previous two species; 'lavender blue' would give a fair idea of the shade. At the moment I'd describe it as useful and pleasant in a low-key sort of way, but not more than that. On the other hand, that French nursery and several American ones give glowing accounts of it. The American nurseries, incidentally, often claim to be offering not *S. penstemonoides* as such but the variation *S. penstemonoides* var. *dalhousiana*. I don't know what the difference, if any, is supposed to be. Can anyone help?

And finally, a few species I'd like to try if and when I can acquire them.

S. rankanensis is relatively easily available (from all of five British nurseries!) so I don't quite know why I haven't acquired it already. Julian Sutton of Desirable Plants also used to offer it when that nursery was still operating, and described it in glowing terms as forming a two-metre-high dome covered in flowers until as late as November (though admittedly that was near Totnes!). And Gill Mullin was almost as ecstatic when she chose it as her HPS Plant of the Month for November 2016. (See <http://www.hardy-plant.org.uk/blog/potm-1611>.) All of which makes it definitely a five-star addition to my ever-increasing list of Plants To Get.

S. nutans is the only truly white-flowered species I know of which, to me at least, makes it particularly desirable. Coming from Nepalese cloud-forests, it is also probably rather less hardy than those I currently grow. On the other hand, it grows happily at Rosemoor and, like *S. rankanensis*, is already offered by a handful of British nurseries. Since it is also much smaller and as it were 'limper' than those *Strobilanthes* already here, it would need careful placing, perhaps in a trough in a sheltered corner or at the front edge of a raised bed.

I don't think any British nursery offers the Japanese *S. oligantha* but my French one does and its description of this more compact, mauve-flowered species makes it

sound perhaps more suitable than the species I currently grow for gardeners who like plants which know their places and stick to them!

The Taiwanese *S. flexicaulis*, available in a Wynn-Jones collection (B & SWJ 354), has particularly handsome toothed velvety foliage and in the autumn produces the usual, but in this case almost purple-blue, trumpet-shaped flowers. I suspect this species is another which isn't all that hardy. Certainly the French nursery suggests giving it warmth, at least some sun, and good rich soil. Despite those possible pitfalls, I can't resist the lure of that foliage.

And finally a collection made by the owners of that so often mentioned nursery. They are Cédric and Marion Basset. Their nursery is Pépinière des Avettes near Varennes (see <http://www.pepinieredesavettes.com>) and their collection is of *S. wakasana* under the collection number CMBJP 2008. This Japanese native was only discovered in 1993 and doesn't yet seem to be available from any British nursery. Like *S. flexicaulis*, it has small velvety leaves (the Bassets describe them as 'duveteuses'), big purple-blue flowers over the usual long autumnal period and is claimed to be vigorous, low-growing and reasonably hardy. It grows so high in the mountains of Honshu that it certainly ought to be reasonably hardy; indeed, its Japanese name, yukimi-bana, apparently means 'snow-watching flower'. There are good photographs and basic botanical information about it, as well as of several other *Strobilanthes* species, on what appears to be the website of an American based in Japan devoted to Japanese wild flowers. It is called Professor Summer's Web Garden and can be found at <http://flowers.la.coocan.jp>. Once there, look in the Index for *Acanthaceae* and that will take you to information about *Strobilanthes*. The rest of the site is also well worth exploring.

So many *Strobilanthes*, so many studies in green and blue. How can any serious shade or woodland gardener not grow at least a few of these under-appreciated and under-used beauties?

Ferns from spores

Joe Sime

The main seed distribution catalogue will be out in a month or so, and I hope it will again contain some fern spores collected by Brian and Sue Dockerill. The point of this is to try to persuade those of you who have not tried them to give it a go. Full details of how to proceed can be found in Sue's article at <http://hardyplantresources.org.uk/library/hardyplant/32b/p25.pdf>.

Wendy has been growing these for the last three years and has had good success. Some are so successful that we have ended up with enough young ferns to 'carpet bed'. The picture shows *Dryopteris pycnopteroides*, a lovely evergreen fern from



China and Japan, planted en-masse under a young wing-nut. Some of the more successful make their way to the sales table at group meetings and I am glad to say that there are a select few who like ferns and they sell reasonably well. Some of the other varieties are less prolific, but the few that you do get can often be very beautiful.

I really like the glossy fronds of *Polystichum neolobatum*, another evergreen fern from China. We got only ten plants but they are looking good in the shade garden.

Wendy has become so addicted that she has joined the British Pteridological Society. Although it is fair to say that the spores from the latter source do not germinate as reliably as those from Sue and Brian!



Name this Plant

Joe Sime

Name this Plant T***** f*****

'Herbs perennial, with short or sometimes long and creeping rhizomes. Stem sometimes branched, usually flexuous, 25--80 cm, glabrous or slightly pubescent distally. Leaves oblanceolate or narrowly elliptic-oblanceolate to obovate, 8--13 × 2.5--4.5 cm, adaxially glabrescent, abaxially pubescent particularly along veins, base usually narrowed and subcuneate, margin ciliate, apex acuminate. Cymes terminal and also axillary in distal part of stem, laxly several flowered; pedicels 1--6 cm, pubescent or glabrous. Flowers trumpet-shaped. Tepals purple-white, with purple spots adaxially, lanceolate, oblanceolate, or oblong, 2--4 cm × 4--11 mm, abaxially usually laxly pubescent; outer ones basally saccate. Stamens usually included. Ovary glabrous. Style subequalling stigmatic lobes. Capsule 2.5--3.5 × 5--6 mm.

* Forests, thickets, shaded places, roadsides; near sea level to 3000 m. Taiwan.'

The solution to last month's puzzle was, by coincidence, *Saxifraga fortunei*.

From the editor...

Joe Sime

Here is the usual plea for contributions. If you all could write at least one small article, once a year we would really have a thriving newsletter. Please send contributions to wasjsime@gmail.com.

SHADE MONTHLY is compiled by Joe Sime.

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