

## PAYBACK: A TALK BY BOB BROWN

*Jeremy Spon*

You always know you are going to get an entertaining talk from Bob, and this was no exception. Rather than use slides, Bob based his talk around plants from his sales table, and a large bunch of material cut from his own garden. Before launching into his subject, Bob got the audience on his side by taking Monty Don to task for perpetuating the old wives tale about agapanthus needing to be pot-bound to flower!

He then proceeded to mention lots of plants that demonstrated both sides of the title of his talk, 'Payback'. By payback, Bob meant a plant earning its space in the garden, and properly repaying the effort taken to grow it. *Sorbaria sorbifolia* 'Sem', for instance he rated at only 3 out of 10, because its brilliant spring foliage was not enough to make up for poor flowers and a dull appearance for the rest of the year.

Other plants are simply not robust enough. Some new hellebore hybrids may contain the genes for 'will not live', taking four years to gradually fade away in the garden (perhaps due to some of the species in their make-up). Some breeders, though, consistently produce long-lived cultivars. In hellebores, Rodney Davey is one such; 'Anna's Red', 'Penny's Pink' and 'Winter Moonbeam' are all his creations, and Bob rates them highly. *Euphorbia* 'Blackbird' is a plant which sells on sight, but does not live long; 'Ascot Rainbow', by contrast, does: Bob said it will definitely get an AGM at the end of the current trial of euphorbias. Heucheras are notoriously prone to attack by vine weevil, but the varieties bred by Thierry de la Croix, such as 'Citrine', seem far less vulnerable; Bob rates de la Croix's hybrids much more highly than those of Dan Heims.

Plants do not have to be new to be good: 'they are new, rare and unusual because they are no bloody good' was a characteristic Bob Brown observation. Bob prefers 'familiar and good', like *Arum italicum* 'Marmoratum' (use Round-up where it isn't wanted, Bob said). Familiar plants can still be improved by developing better foliage. With *Forsythia*, the foliage can be rather dull, but the variety 'Fiesta' has very good variegation and a restrained habit. *Euphorbia epithymoides* (formerly *polychroma*) has a variety, 'First Blush', with a much better leaf.

It is always worth seeking out the better plants; Bob showed us *Grevillea victoriae*, which is much hardier than the needle-leaved species which are more widely grown, but just as good in flower. By contrast, *Skimmia* 'Kew Green' is anything but rare; having received what Bob called the 'ultimate accolade' of making it into Tesco car parks, it is still an excellent evergreen.

There are many characteristics which should be considered: length of flowering, for instance. For a euphorbia which flowers all year round, try *E. ceratocarpa*, and for a grass that flowers into, and through, winter if it is mild, how about *Oryzopsis miliacea*? Hydrangeas can be tricky to prune, but mop-headed varieties that flower on the current year's wood are now appearing (possibly as a result of genetic manipulation in Japan) such as 'You and Me Together' and 'Love Me Kiss' (names which are possibly literal translations from Japanese).

Plants that set seed often flower for quite a short period, so sterile hybrids can be an improvement; e.g. *Polemonium* 'Northern Lights' which, as well as continuous flowering, has the benefit of very good perfume. Lack of seed can also prevent a plant becoming invasive; *Muscati* 'Jenny Robinson' is a non-seeding hybrid, and is also better than the similarly coloured 'Valerie Finnis' because the leaves do not appear until spring, along with the flowers. There are even plants that benefit from never flowering. There are two varieties of variegated kale which look very similar - 'Daubenton Panache' and 'Chantilly Cream' - but the former is superior because it does not flower, and is therefore perennial.

All these examples show how closely Bob has observed the plants he grows; we might not notice the differences between varieties, but once pointed out, the importance of these differences becomes clear. One last example: there are several *Cornus* grown for their winter stems; who of us has noticed that the best known, 'Midwinter Fire', only really colours well on the sunny side? Bob has, and recommends instead 'Anny's Winter Orange', which is orange-red on all sides of its stems. This is the sort of knowledge which we all come to Bob's lectures to acquire, and this talk was as rich in such insights as ever.

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