

THE FLOWERING OF MELIANTHUS MAJOR

John Hudson

I have long regarded my favourite foliage plant as the only plant in my garden that is at its best in November. Normally, its great, toothed leaves are spoiled by frost and wind during the winter, so I cut back its woody stems to the ground. It then starts into growth again in late spring. I used to believe the books that say it is not quite hardy, wondering if it would appear at all, but my main clump has grown bigger over the hard winters of 2009–12, so I no longer worry about that. After a slow start, it grows steadily, so by the time most perennials around it are fading, it over-tops them.



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As everybody knows, the winter of 2013-14 was exceptionally mild, though wet. The melianthus was not cut back, though some of the lower leaves became bedraggled. I reported in our Rutland HPS Group Spring Newsletter that it was producing a flower bud. In the event, several appeared during April and May, both on the main clump in a sunny position, and on another in shade. I had seen melianthus in flower before, in a sheltered garden in Dorset, where it was at least 3m high, and last November in Otago, New Zealand on a small plant, but my plants had never flowered before.



Melianthus major
in flower

The question then was, what to do next? I was worried that if I left the tall, woody, flowered stems, the usual regrowth might be inhibited and thus spoil the summer and autumn display. I decided on a compromise. The big clump had divided itself into two. On one part, I cut the flowered stems to the ground. On the other, I cut off the fading flowers but left the stems. This resulted in new growth from below the cut, so by late summer I had a high-level foliage plant with bright new leaves, about 2m tall. I removed the old lower leaves as they faded, leaving bare stems. The plant is still in that state in early November. It has not produced much new growth from the base. The part-clump that I cut right back in spring, however, has regrown as usual, although it is not as tall this November as in previous years. I left one stem on the shaded plant until it seeded, and only cut it back in October.

Provisionally, the message is that if you want your melianthus primarily for its foliage, cut it back by early spring, whatever the winter has done to it. If you want a tall foliage feature for a summer after a mild winter, remove the flower heads in late spring, and try to ensure that your plant is behind some tall-ish summer perennials to hide the bare lower stems.

Either way, do grow *Melianthus major*.