

PLAYING WITH THE BIG BOYS

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At the mention of shade plants, people tend to think of the smaller varieties; epimediums, actaea etc., but if you have the space, and if the overhanging shade is tall enough, there are some herbaceous 'big boys' that will add scale to your plot. I would like to talk about five of my favourites.

Aralia cachemirica

When fully grown and happy, this is a huge plant growing to 10 ft, and spreading to 8 ft. It is incredible to think that all this growth is totally herbaceous and dies down to the ground every winter. The leaves are compound, with a strong central stem up to 3 ft long and mid-green, ovate, tapered leaflets. The flowers individually are tiny and creamy white, but they are clustered in large sprays, up to 3 ft long. In a good year, these are followed by many tiny, purple-black berries, although in some years these seem to fail to swell and remain small, hard and purple. As autumn approaches the leaves start to colour and can have interesting purple tinges. It is an impressive sight throughout the growing season. It will grow almost anywhere, as long as there is adequate moisture in the summer and no waterlogging in the winter, but it is best in shade, with a rich deep soil. Planted amid the canopy of trees in a shade garden, it is often well sheltered from the winds and can get particularly tall.

It is easy to grow from seed. Collect the berries when ripe and 'squidge' them up in a shallow bowl of water. Once they are well broken down, decant off the water and the berry pulp and you will see the tiny cream coloured seeds in the bottom of the bowl. Plant them thinly into a pot. The seedlings will appear in the following spring. The trick is now to grow them on in pots, well protected from slugs, until you have good sized plants. If you commit them to the garden too early, then the molluscs will devour them before they can grow up. They need to have enough resources to get their stems quickly into the air before the assault gets under way. They will take a year or two to settle in, but apart from removing the dead growth in the autumn, they need no further attention and will last for years.

Senecio cannabifolius

This does not quite reach the size of *Aralia cachemirica*. It is a rhizomatous plant that produces strong stems up to 7 ft tall, clothed in the well-shaped leaves that give the plant its name. I find it curious that botanists are all so well acquainted with the leaves of *Cannabis sativa* that they use it as a specific epithet. For those of us with less 'botanical experience' the leaves are about 2 ft long with narrow, lance shaped, toothed lobes. They look very elegant. In summer the stems are topped with corymb-like clusters of small, mid yellow, daisy like flowers. These are followed by a mass of fluffy seeds. I have never found self-sown seedlings, but the plant spreads by rhizomes that run close to the surface of a good woodland soil. This makes it quite easy to keep the clump within bounds. I simply pull up the shoots and excess rhizome from where they are not wanted in the spring. For such an impressive woodland plant, it is surprisingly rare in cultivation, with only one supplier listed in the plant finder. Ours was grown from seed from Ray Brown's Sakhalin expedition of a few years ago. The plant is found throughout North East Asia and into Alaska. It is undemanding, providing it has decent woodland conditions.

Phytolacca americana

In nature, this is a plant of margins and disturbed places mainly in south central and eastern North America, although now it is naturalised in parts of Europe and also in China, where it is grown for use in Chinese medicine. Being adapted to life at the edge, it is equally happy in sun or shade. Well-grown it can be a large plant - to as much as 9 ft - but in shade it is usually no bigger than about 6 ft. The main stems are strong and arch out to give a bushy but upright plant. They often

have a reddish purple cast. The leaves are oval and tapered at the end, about 6 ins by 4 ins and borne on petioles about 2 ins long. Flowers are borne on racemes up to about 10 ins long. They are usually white but can have a pinkish cast. On some plants, the racemes are held stiffly upright; on others they droop, and this used to be thought of as defining two different variants of the species. It is worth growing for the foliage and flowers, but its best feature is the fruit. The flowers are replaced by berries which turn to a bright, glossy black as they ripen. They are popular with birds.

It is very easy from seed. Collect the berries when ripe (beware the purple juice; it stains, and, like the rest of the plant, is toxic). Break the berries up in plenty of water, then pour off the excess water with the pulp, to leave behind the hard, black seeds. Sow these immediately. They will germinate in the following spring. It will take a year or two for the plant to bulk up. It overwinters as a tuber, and takes a few years to get enough energy reserves to flower. It is easy and trouble free as long as it is not dry in the summer and there is no waterlogging of the crown of the tuber in the winter. When I bought my first plant, I was advised not to cut off the stems in the autumn as this could allow water to get down to the tuber through the hollow stem. I did this for a couple of years before losing patience and just chopping the dead stuff off with the rest of the perennials in the winter clear out. The plants survived.

Ligularia japonica 'Rising Sun' BSWJ 6293

Somewhat smaller than those above, this plant grows to about 5 ft and spreads to about 3 ft. The foliage is stunning. The leaves are large, veined and deeply dissected, looking a bit like those of a Swiss cheese plant. It bears stout flower spikes with several, reasonably sized, bright yellow, daisy-like flowers in mid-summer. These are followed by the fluffy seed heads typical of the genus. But you will grow it for the foliage, which adds real contrast in the shade garden. The plant needs a good, moist soil to look its best. It can be grown in the open, but then needs a constant supply of water, and even so will look sad on a hot afternoon. It is happiest in moist shade. The variety is said to be more vigorous than the basic species. We bought ours from Crûg, but a few other nurseries now offer it. We have not tried vegetative propagation, but have grown it from seed. Be warned, most of the fluff produced is not fertile seed. These are relatively large, hard and dense. You will be lucky to retrieve more than two or three seeds from the fluff on a flower head. They grow easily, but like all young *ligularia*, they are slug caviar. Grow them on in pots where you can protect them and only plant out once you have a good sized plant.

Aruncus dioicus

I know it is a common plant, but there is a good reason for this; it is superb in leaf and flower. It looks like a huge astilbe, although they come from different plant families. In reliably moist soil in shade, it can make 6 ft or more, with a base of compound, pinnate leaves about 3ft by 3ft and creamy white flower spikes reaching to 6 ft. Although best in moist soil, once established it will put up with a drier site and still look good. The only drawback is that the flower spikes fade to a mucky brown, and are best cut off at this stage if they offend you. The Italians cut the young shoots in spring and use them as a vegetable. I have never tried this.

We have never had viable seed on our plants, but they all come from the same clone. Vegetative propagation is made a little problematic by the fact that the crown becomes very tough and woody with age, and it is a job to hack bits off it. Try a hammer and cold chisel! If 6 ft is too much for you then *A. dioicus* var. *kamtschaticus* is a smaller beast - at least in our garden - growing to about 4 ft and looking a little more delicate than its big brother. Ours originated from seed from Ray Brown's Sakhalin expedition. We had good germination and so planted out quite a few. Now we have a colony that produces fertile seed and self-seeds freely. This is not a problem; they pull up easily where you do not want them.

I hope this encourages you to try a few of the 'big boys' in your own shade garden. They will add height and scale even to a relatively small plot.