

## SEDUMS: FRIENDS IN DANGER

Alex Pankhurst

It wasn't until I moved to dry old Essex that I realised what wonderful plants sedums are. With their fleshy leaves and roots designed to store moisture, they laugh off drought. Yet if there's an unusually wet summer they don't seem to mind, and on my free-draining, gravel soil, the border varieties, *Sedum spectabile* and *S. telephium* have proved reliably hardy. They spread slowly into pleasing clumps, blooming for weeks on end in late summer, and the only attention they need, or get, is the removal of spent flower stalks as they die away in autumn.

Sedums are also useful as companion plants to spring bulbs, which do their stuff before the sedums get going and fade away by midsummer. In a particularly parched spot beside my drive, the lovely white *Camassia leichtlinii* subsp. *leichtlinii* (as we're now supposed to call it) manages to coexist happily with a drift of *Sedum telephium*. It's a partnership I admire every year. Not my doing, it has to be said; they sort of grew into each other.

I've planted a number of sedum cultivars over the years and found some more rewarding than others. Those with variegated leaves, in my experience, are not worth their high price; they seem determined to revert to plain green, and lack stamina. But *Sedum* 'Joyce Henderson', 'Matrona' and *S. telephium* 'Purple Emperor', I wouldn't be without. They're wonderful. However, this year has been a disaster: the plants have come under vicious and sustained attack.

It took a while to notice what was going on. At first it just looked as if a spider had made its home on the plant, weaving a little cobweb round the growing stems. Only if one peered closely did it become clear that what were spinning the increasingly thick webs were not spiders, but caterpillars, little grey-green jobs energetically eating the unfortunate host plant.

I consulted Google, where the RHS advised that this was the sedum ermine moth, *Yponomeuta vigintipunctata*. A moth that apparently liked to 'live gregariously' in little cobwebby communities.

Gregarious? As in, 'Hey fellers, fancy a drink down the pub tonight'? I don't think so. They had no intention of going anywhere, smug as they were inside their cosy home. Nothing could get at them.

No good trying to spray insecticide; they had the protection of what had become a dense web. Birds couldn't eat the wriggly pests either, for the same reason. According to the RHS, the only course of action was to prune off the affected foliage and burn it. That seemed a rotten thing to do, cutting my valued sedums to the ground before they'd had a chance to flower. But they were going to be completely consumed, and were in no fit state to bloom anyway.



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*Sedum telephium* 'Arthur Branch'



© Donald Hobern

The sedum ermine moth



© Mandy Allen

**Sedum ermine moth caterpillars**



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**Sedum ermine moth webs**

As the summer wore on, every time I spotted a sedum with that telltale fuzzy look about it, my reluctance turned to panic. Having nowhere to site a bonfire, I filled bag after bag with affected sedum foliage - sealed to prevent the caterpillars escaping - and put them out for the dustman.

The RHS warns that this wretched moth can achieve two generations in one summer - one in April or May, and again in August - and almost certainly I haven't spotted every affected plant, so some rogue caterpillars will have turned into moths. It doesn't bode well for next season.

Where have they come from, and why have they suddenly appeared? Have other HPS members suffered similar infestations? Will this pest mean that we can no longer grow border sedums? Luckily, the prostrate and low-growing ones seem relatively unaffected. I don't grow lilies anymore because of the depredations of the dastardly lily beetle, which is sad enough. But no border sedums? For those of us gardening in dry old East Anglia, that would be tragic.



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**Sedum ermine moth mainly affects cultivars of *Sedum telephium*. Low-growing sedums often avoid attack.**