

A cuttings garden

Teresa Farnham

© Teresa Farnham



The front of the Register Office in 1995

In Waltham Forest, E17, a beautiful red brick building, built as a vicarage in 1880, is now used to register births, marriages and deaths as well as civil partnerships and citizenship ceremonies. In 1995, the Chief Registrar asked us to ‘make a garden’ around the building. The area is heavily used by the public. There were lawns and some mature, shapeless shrubs, razored by hedge trimmers every season. The soil contained a concentration of weed

killer and salt run-off from the paths. A car park and church foundations lay underneath.

I hope my account will encourage gardeners with the challenge of shallow, poor, polluted soil.

By the autumn of 1995 the planting had begun. As it is a ‘working’ garden, the plants would have to be tough and duly survive trampling, wedding litter, intermittent drought/heavy rain, and air pollution. The garden also had to be low

© Teresa Farnham



...and in 2009

maintenance – just one day a week, less if the weather is atrocious. Confetti and streamers are removed then, and we cut the lawns, which have to survive summer droughts and come back in the autumn. At first, watering new plants was a problem, but now we water only the pots and hanging baskets.

Despite our initial surveys, some of the areas designated for flowerbeds were found to be over scree and rubble (there was just 7cm of soil under the sycamore in

the back garden – now increased to 20cm). An initial drought and a cold wet winter meant many of the new plants suffered. They didn't establish well in the shallow soil, so I began taking cuttings of every plant that I thought might take, many from divisions of established plants and those donated by fellow gardeners and local people. I also put in cuttings **next** to the parent plant, and I soon realised that they



© Teresa Farnaham

The marriage room exit in 1995

I carefully nurtured in pots! Hebes and penstemons were wonderful this way. If I can get a plant such as a penstemon grown from a cutting to survive a winter, I know that it will be in the garden for life. Roses took two to three years to be happy despite heavy feeding and mulching, but rose cuttings settle in and thrive after a year or two; so now, every autumn, I take cuttings of 'Wedding Day' and 'Pink Perpétué' about 20cm long to a bud, remove the lower thorns and stick them in the ground about 5cm deep. I usually use three cuttings and add grit or fine sand if I have any to hand.

I spread *Centaurea* and *Linaria* by throwing the seed heads into borders after deadheading. Box cuttings also edge a flowerbed in front of the marriage room – again placed directly into the soil. I hope this year's replacement *Lavandula x intermedia* Dutch Group (often known as *vera*) and *Hebe rakaiensis* cuttings will be on their way by next summer.

Our motto is 'no bare earth means no weeds!' However, visiting gardeners on NGS open days are horrified that I let 'weeds' such as alkanet proliferate and they complain about its deep roots. But it does some digging for me and gives shade to the roots of more tender plants. Besides, I like the blue of the flowers and sometimes remove the leaves to leave the flowers at the end of a stalk, especially if it has seeded next to a pink



© Teresa Farnaham

...and in 2009



Two more views of the marriage room exit

penstemon or hardy geranium. (The herbalist Gerard wrote that alkanet will ‘drive forth the measles and small pox if it be drunke in the beginning with hot beere’ !)

Bedding plants can’t be used because they need deadheading and regular watering, but plants grown from cuttings, such as *Erysimum* ‘Bowles’s Mauve’ and *Penstemon* ‘Andenken an Friedrich Hahn’ (syn. ‘Garnet’), provide colour in containers through the year. *Symphytum grandiflorum* provides ground cover, as does *Geranium* ‘Johnson’s Blue’.

Most of the plants are examples of those that survive in dry and adverse conditions, many originating from New Zealand and South Africa. *Osteospermum* cuttings survived last winter’s snow to flourish in pots, which has

encouraged me to try cuttings directly in the flowerbeds. These beds are now viable – I have found out which plants tolerate the garden, and plants from cuttings from over 40 genera have survived happily for at least 5 years. Such plants also keep expenditure low.

We ignore the pruning rules to keep a continuous backcloth of green for wedding photographs, and any plant that contributes is allowed to grow. In some places we planted shrubs by first chiselling a hole through the concrete down to the subsoil, but they took a long time to flourish. I also introduced common shrubs such as *Teucrium* (wall germander) using their roots to dig the soil for me. Sometimes fuchsias will come through the winter in a mixed shrub border, but the frost gets to their roots in the shallow soil and they disappear after a while.

Some time ago, the mayor asked to plant a tree in the garden, so in the deepest flowerbed he planted a relic of the Ice Age, *Arbutus unedo*, thankfully now flourishing after sulking for a few years. When I underplanted it with a cutting of myrtle it seemed to be rejuvenated – whether just a coincidence I do not know. In 1998 the Council invited every garden in the Borough to request a tree. I asked for a dark red *Acer palmatum* ‘Atropurpureum’ and planted it in the neighbouring vicarage garden which provides some shade to the car park and a backdrop to a *Sorbus hupehensis* ‘Pink Pagoda’. Under the sycamore in the back garden grows a fine specimen of *Abelia grandiflora*. Cuttings from the *Abelia* were put into the front garden five years ago and are now well established, giving honeysuckle scent to the Register Office entrance. *Euonymus* is regularly pruned and cuttings placed in pots or borders,



The rescued cordyline



The grass survives the heat and feet



Hebe rakaiensis and *Euonymus* in pots

very useful for winter colour – if we have a very wet winter the daffodil bulbs rot, but shrub cuttings continue to survive.

I continue to try to eradicate ivy from the building's soft red brick. I've put in cuttings of *X Fatsyhedera lizei*, a bi-generic cross between *fatsia* and *hedera*. It is characteristic of both plants, with large leathery green leaves but without the invasive tendrils of ivy, so it needs tying to a support or another sturdy plant. I had originally bought one as an indoor plant, but after overwintering it outdoors I put in cuttings and gradually I am managing to replace the ivy.

The garden eats compost so anything and everything possible is used. This year, the addition of shreadings from office waste paper has speeded up compost heap decomposition dramatically. Redundant office plants are reused as compost, or replanted – some cordylines recycled from an office display are now 8m tall; they blossom every year and have a heavenly scent.

We don't use pesticides or weedkillers, which encourages wildlife. The bird population has increased over the years – blackbirds, blue tits, robins and sparrows are frequent visitors – and the frogs we found under a buried garden path remain. I leave heaps of prunings (out of sight of the wedding photographers!) around the garden for the frogs. Alas, we cannot have any water features because of the danger to children in the wedding parties. But even in such a wildlife-friendly environment, biological pest control isn't totally effective: an old white rosemary (planted in 1997) flourishes, but the pink and blue bushes were infested with rosemary beetle last year and had to be destroyed.

The 'new garden', planted 7 years ago, incorporated some of an area where until 1960 a church had stood. The building foundations are still under the flowerbeds so plants find their root-run through the hidden brick. The elders and lilacs were left to provide shade, as well as support for passion flowers and jasmine (also grown from cuttings). In an



The lavender path

'ordinary' garden many of the shrubs would be removed or heavily pruned, but the family of foxes delights in digging holes and removing any new plants to get at the grubs/worms underneath! I plant replacements from cuttings of tough plants such as hebe and geranium, but because of the foxes I barricade the roots with broken clay pots and pyracantha wands. Squirrels dig up the compost in the pots in the winter and dig holes in the lawn. We have other vandals too, human as well as animal – a hole was found in the middle of the choisya bush and I blamed foxes again, but evidently a wedding photographer had decided the bride needed extra greenery in her bouquet!

The rear garden is usually accessible only for ceremonies, but from 1999 permission was given to open on May Days under the NGS. Gardeners from other countries, including the US and Japan, visit to see what can be cultivated in such shallow soil conditions, and members of the local community have the opportunity to visit – as well as seeing what plants survive in the local soil, they go home with plenty of cuttings and often pop in to tell me what has taken. 🐾

Teresa Farnham has made friends with gardeners from Europe, Japan, Canada and the US through her work on this garden. She says that the garden has widened her botanical knowledge – and patience!

Astilbe, Bergenia & Rodgersia in the Family Saxifragaceae **Aileen Stocks**

Hardy Plant Society 64pp £3.00 inc. postage to members



This latest HPS booklet is a part revision of the three largest genera of Aileen's original booklet on Saxifragaceae, published in 1995. In the intervening years plant breeders and plant hunters have swelled the list of plants to grow, making it impossible to give a comprehensive treatment of the family in a single small volume.

Aileen describes the characteristics and history of each genus, and gives advice on their suitability for particular garden positions and on maintenance and propagation. For each genus there is a comprehensive list of species, hybrids and cultivars, with brief descriptions. Information on the National Collections is included.

The book is illustrated with colour photographs by the author and line drawings by artists Janet Wood and Shirley-Anne Kennedy.