

No Trouble

Alex Pankhurst

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Fig. 1 *Omphalodes cappadocica*
'Cherry Ingram'.

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Fig. 2 *Caltha palustris* 'Flore Pleno'
with *Heuchera* 'Emperor's Cloak'

Years ago I visited a Garden Luminary. It was autumn, and I was there to gather information for a book, not admire the garden. Nor was I offered a tour, but what could be seen of it disappointed. I had expected exciting, and probably rare, horticultural treasures. But the owner was elderly, and the garden appeared to consist largely of groundcover plants. I felt cheated and somewhat puzzled. When you love plants, how could you be satisfied with that?

Nearly two decades on, I have more sympathy. With old age on the horizon, my gardening outlook has shifted. I've now regretfully abandoned the most labour-intensive plants – dreadful spreaders, and annuals and biennials such as foxgloves and poppies that seed like crazy – in favour of things which are less demanding of time and one's back. Traditional 'ground cover' plants are the stock answer for an easy-care garden, and media gardening bods encourage the view that they are a panacea. 'All you have to do is...', they advise glibly, holding out the promise of a wonderful, problem-free garden. That's like saying that bringing up children is unalloyed joy from start to finish. Well nuts to that. 'These plants will spread nicely and soon cover the ground', they

smile, recommending plants you've vowed never to allow near the garden again. Of course they blooming well will. It's just that nothing is said about the endless work of keeping them under control.

When able to do less gardening, I shall certainly want the ground to be covered, but bullying thugs are not the solution. What's needed are plants that flower attractively, block out weeds, and don't demand more than their fair share of space. Oh, and preferably they shouldn't require any action from me. No Trouble

Plants, in other words. Looking round the garden it's pleasing to realise how many of them are already quietly in place.

Top of my NTPs is *Omphalodes cappadocica* 'Cherry Ingram' (fig. 1). This is a large-flowered form, and the most obliging, well-mannered plant that can be imagined. I do nothing to it, absolutely nothing, and every spring it's covered with short spikes of gorgeous clear blue flowers, for weeks. It must renew its leaves some time, perhaps when I go away for a few days ('Quick, do it now, so she doesn't notice') because the clump never seems to be disfigured by withered ones, and the flowers die away discreetly. It comes from Turkey, so puts up with my dry conditions cheerfully, and after eight years the clump is three foot across.

Thankfully not near it, ensuring the colours don't shout at each other, is the double flowered form of our native marsh marigold, *Caltha palustris* 'Flore Pleno' (fig. 2). When my sons dug the pond nearly thirty years ago, the ordinary marsh marigold was planted as a marginal. Big mistake. I should have been warned by the river of yellow in a damp meadow near my childhood home. It seeded with determination, and had to be replaced by the double-flowered form, which is sterile. Again, I don't even touch this plant, and yet it flowers its (wet) socks off every spring, the many-petalled gold flowers gloriously reflected in the still water beneath.

Across the patio from the pond is a raised bed, draped with another OAP's friend, *Lithodora diffusa* 'Picos' (fig. 3). I had given up on lithodoras, finding them picky about soil and not strong growers, but *L. d.* 'Picos' is different. It was collected some years ago in the northern Spanish mountains of the same name, doesn't seem to require acid soil, and loves life. The waterfall of dark green foliage is covered in March and April with navy blue flowers. Makes me feel a good gardener just to look at it. When the plants do all the work they have that effect.

Flowering through April into May is a *Phlox subulata* (fig. 4), variety name unknown. It was bought at a plant sale principally because the thing was bursting out of its pot, and I like plants with vigour. This has it in spades, spreading and



Fig. 3 *Lithodora diffusa* 'Picos'



Fig. 4 *Phlox subulata*



Fig. 5 *Stachys macrantha*

an unpromising part of that is *Stachys macrantha* (fig. 5). It must have been there for twenty years, disappearing below ground in winter, dutifully producing knee-high, purple flowers in June. It does make seed, but I've never found a seedling. It spreads, but not into other plants' territories. Actually I hardly notice it, not being particularly fond of the flowers. It's like a loyal friend that you've known forever, even if you don't have that much in common. Looks as though this plant will be accompanying me into old age.

So will *Saxifraga x urbium* (fig. 6), the traditional London Pride. If it were difficult to grow, we'd all crow over this superb groundcover plant. Because it's

gently rooting, bullying the grass into submission, a sheet of soft mauve flowers. Its joie de vivre is almost matched by another, again name unknown, but that has to be placed in the gravel garden where its eye-popping cerise is toned down by the high light levels. Although I can't tell a *Phlox subulata* from a *P. douglasii*, the former do seem to be stronger growing.

When the phlox has finished flowering, it forms a neat, green cushion, a foil for the action in the border behind, and tucked into



Fig. 6 *Saxifraga x urbium* fronts a bed in dry shade.



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Fig. 7 *Phuopsis stylosa*

regarded as ‘common’, nobody mentions the thing. But I value it highly. It occupies the front of two borders shaded by shrubs, and keeps weeds at bay very attractively. Speaking of shade (and mine is all the dreaded dry shade), what could be better than sheets of *Cyclamen hederifolium*? Yes they seed about a bit, because ants plant them in odd places. (Perhaps they bury the seeds like squirrels hide nuts, thinking they’ll come back for them later. Or do ants have hitherto unsuspected gardening tendencies? They farm aphids, after all.) It’s only for three summer months that the cyclamen are not providing either flower or leaf interest, and that has to be pretty good value.

I’m not a great fan of hardy geraniums, too many of them. But *Geranium Rozanne* couldn’t be more obliging. Being sterile, there’s no problem about it seeding, and those big blue flowers go on for months. In winter I remove the old dead growth, but if I were unable to do that it probably wouldn’t matter too much.

New heucheras are being brought out all the time, but I’m not sure any will surpass an old favourite, *H. ‘Emperor’s Cloak’* (fig. 2), which lives in a mat of seven plants outside the kitchen window. It’s been there for years, and only has the dead flower stalks picked off in winter. No other attention required. The leaves are a medley of maroon shades, leaves creased and indented, a most obliging pool of shape and colour. I gaze appreciatively at it through the window, when on the telephone.



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Figs 8 & 9 *Ceratostigma plumbaginoides*



Fig. 10 *Symphytum* 'Goldsmith'

Symphytum 'Goldsmith' (fig. 10) could do their stuff without threatening other plants. I'd have more epimediums, let the various mongrel hellebores seed about as much as they want to, and plant *Thymus longicaulis* in several sunny places. This is a really good thyme, the best I know for forming a dense mat that doesn't go bare on you. The golden-leaved *Thymus pulegioides* 'Bertram Anderson' is pretty good too, in my inhospitably dry conditions anyway. The patch has been in situ for over fifteen years, and only had to be pulled to bits and replanted once in all that time.

Of course what behaves admirably in one part of the country, may do the opposite elsewhere. I propose to grow lots of *Salvia officinalis* 'Purpurascens' and 'Icterina'; they like the sun and dryness, and cover the ground pleasingly. But they'd probably sulk in wetter areas, and gardeners in such places could instead have huge clumps of hostas and great spreads of *Saxifraga exarata* subsp. *moschata*. The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Plants forbids trying to grow hostas on gravel soil in North Essex, and mossy saxifrages simply scorch.

Those with small gardens especially advocate double planting – snowdrops, *Crocus tommasinianus*, hyacinths and chionodoxas through groundcover for instance – and this is surely a good thing to plan for. Question: why hasn't it been done already? Well, I haven't got time, your Honour. One day I will though.

When people, usually non-gardeners, survey your beloved patch and ask how many hours a week you spend on it, do you lie? I do. They'd be incredulous if told the truth, and it's probably better not to dwell on it oneself. But if we could achieve a whole garden of No Trouble Plants, we could totter on smugly into our nineties and still find the garden pleasing. The quest is on.

So this means I won't buy any more little treasures, succumb to things that are beautiful but just a touch tender, or take home that mysterious, unnamed orphan on the plant table? Who am I kidding. 🐾

Alex Pankhurst is always on the lookout for plants that will thrive but not take over in her dry gravelly soil in North Essex. Alex is the author of two books.