

Growing half-hardy plants – a post-February 2009 update

Rob Senior

Publishing deadlines meant that Jeremy Spon and I had to write for the spring issue before the bitter cold struck. Now I report on our experience in Cornwall.

Last winter was very cold here, as for much of the country. Here in West Penwith it was the coldest for 22 years, with night temperatures of -3° to -12°C in varying locations on this sea-girt peninsula with its various microclimates.

I remain intrigued by folklore climatology. Everyone knows of ‘Red sky at night...’, but what of Candlemas? A ‘fixed feast’, the anniversary of the purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary on 2nd February, it is an ancient festival even in Britain – the Venerable Bede recorded its celebration in the early eighth century as the ‘Feast of St Mary’.

The doggerel related to the feast varies as much as the regions of the UK. Mother’s was much as the ‘contrived rhyme from Devon’ found in the excellent *The English Year*¹. On the nearest Sunday to the feast our vicar, a retired dairy farmer, gave his version:

If Candlemas be clear and bright, winter will have another bite;

If Candlemas dawn dark and drear, winter’s o’er for another year.

February 2nd was indeed clear. The following day began clear, bright and cold, with snow flurries, -3° at dawn. It became colder... colder... and colder, especially the nights. I cannot say how long the nocturnal lows of -10° or -12° persisted – the max/min thermometer may have recorded the minima of only a few minutes duration. The length of time must matter.

There has been much damage and death in the borderline inhabitants of our horticultural scene. Everyone has a tale to tell. But – this harks back to the spring journal – everyone has encouraging stories



Fig. 1 *Telopea oreades* killed outright



Fig. 2 *Metrosideros tomentosa* regrowing

¹Steve Roud, Penguin Books 2006



Fig. 3 *F. parmentieri* in fine form

of pleasant surprises, outweighing (for normal, optimistic gardeners) the disappointments.

I realise that this scenario applies nationwide and similar reports are widespread. For example, the recent Australian Plant Society's newsletter included specific details from half a dozen correspondents, all of interest and informative, but increasingly I wonder what individual gardeners can consider The Definitive Truth, based on their own experience or that of others. There are so many variables.

In July, plants were still dying (I believe as a result of the winter) and others, apparently dead or moribund, now show signs of recovery. If I gave a list it could be no more significant than any other. Waratahs for instance. A single 1m *Teloepa oreades* (fig. 1) and a similar hybrid *T. 'Dawn Fire'* were stone dead overnight; a

couple of the Tasmanian *T. truncata*, being untouched, have since flowered profusely. Two *T. speciosissima*, which I had regarded as miffy, not only survived but also flowered for the first time after ten years.

If not killed by the severe cold, they seem to be stimulated to flower. *Metrosideros* is a case in point. *MM. excelsa* and *tomentosa* (fig. 2) (2.5 and 3m tall respectively) were killed to ground level but are now regrowing; but *M. umbellata*, at over 2m, was untouched and, despite being but seven years old, has flowered for the first time, when I had been warned it would take three or four times that period.

Was the unusual cold the stimulus to flower, or simply that all the plants in the district were equally mature? Whatever the explanation, furcraeas blooming have been a spectacle in west Cornwall (and elsewhere?). The flowering of these monocarpic *Agavaceae* is a magnificent event – huge fountains of yellow-green flowers – whether they are *F. parmentieri* (fig. 3) or not is debated in these parts. Some growers differentiate *FF. bedinghausii* and *longaeva*, while the Plant Finder lumps them under *parmentieri*. The seedpods rarely matter as propagation is from the myriad bulbils forming on the flower stems. I think this borderline hardy plant is, like *Echium pininana* and *Geranium maderense* worth protecting and cossetting until mature, when a spring planting out gives a marvellous summer exhibition. *Furcraea*'s fountain of flowers adorned Penzance's Fountain Inn!

Puya (fig. 4) have also flowered exceptionally this year – *PP. alpestris*, *coerulea* and *chilensis* with many intermediate hybrids.

I had always thought that sunny, warm weather stimulated flowering, but now wonder if some plants require a cold interlude to initiate or continue the process? This arose out of considering the moveable feast of ‘blackthorn winter’: many will have observed sloe (*Prunus spinosa*) blooming in association with renewed wintry conditions. Whereas previously it seemed to me to ‘coincide’, I now wonder if blackthorn endures winter as other plants, its flower buds swelling in a warm spring-like period but requiring another cold wintry chill to stimulate the buds to open? It seems an odd quirk of evolution if so, as surely insect pollinators would not be as prevalent during cold weather.

Citrus responded variously to the cold. One lemon – ‘Quatre Saisons’ – died, while another specimen, close to a wall, defoliated but has recovered rapidly. A 20-year-old Meyer’s lemon looked very tatty but has fully recovered and is already flowering. Three Seville oranges against south walls were relatively undamaged though the oldest had its 30 mature oranges frozen, so our own-brand marmalade is off this year.

From the spring notes – *Strelitzia reginae* (fig. 5) was, as usual, killed to the ground but also, as usual, is recovering and, given an average chance to grow, should flower again in 2010. A surprise came with the fabulous blue- and white-flowered giant *S. nicolai* which is showing signs of recovery. Two *S. juncea* and, very sadly, an 80cm *S. caudata* were killed outright.

Leucadendron argenteum (fig. 6), my second major loss, I cut back to a metre stump, 25cm in diameter, which seemed alive, but there is no indication of re-growth to date. *Proteaceae* have been interesting. All other leucodendrons died outright but a small *L.*



Fig. 4 *Puya* has flowered magnificently



Fig. 5 *Strelitzia reginae* recovering



Fig. 6 *Leucadendron argenteum*

Fig. 7 New shoots of *Protea cynaroides*Fig. 8 *Xeronema* lifted for TLC

'Inca Gold' is recovering from below ground. All the proteas except *subvestita*, *venusta* and *cynaroides* died. Four largish *cynaroides* (fig. 7) were killed to ground level; at this stage a knowledgeable colleague impatiently dug her plant out, but it only takes a wait of 5 or 6 weeks for a forest of regrowth to occur. I can recommend the first two to anyone gardening within Zone 7 or 8.

Hence another minor problem: the regrowth of many single-stemmed plants – *Callistemon*, *Melaleuca*, *Banksia*, *Pittosporum coriaceum* and *undulatum*, *Brugmansia*, *Macadamia* – results in 10, 20 or 30 shoots. These have to be reduced to a 'reasonable' number to allow growth. The first time this happened to me, in 1987, I asked guru Mike Nelhams, Curator of Tresco Abbey Gardens, what to do with a *Protea cynaroides* thicket. He patiently

explained reduction and asked "and why not use shoots as cuttings?" Protea cuttings! I'd regarded this genus with awe and temerity but they do root well! Now a repeat this year.

Of the Cestrum, *C. aurantiacum* was cut to the ground but regrowing strongly; all five *C. nocturnum* were killed but I'll try again; the others survived. *Xeronema* (fig. 8) was very badly damaged and lifted for tender-loving-care and is now replanted.

So in retrospect – that wonderful viewpoint – it was not a good idea to plant out *Heliconia bihai* – the lobster claw – in 2008. Anyone visiting larger flower shows will have wondered at the amazing, bizarre, colourful flowers from this tropical genus. Having read that this Central American species is perhaps the most cold-hardy (the RHS Dictionary says Z9), I built up a stock of vigorous plants, placing one in the warmest spot in the garden.

But at the end of July, two small *Heliconia* leaves were emerging...and even in September the apparently dead show signs of resurrection. This gardening compulsion is a real roller-coaster ride! 🌱

Rob Senior continues to relish the challenge and satisfaction of growing plants which remain on the borderlines, even on the Cornish Riviera.