

Gardening from seed — a personal story

Barbara Matthewman

Recently a friend recounted how she joined the HPS many years ago after being impressed by a garden shown on Gardener's World grown largely from HPS seed. It wasn't the reason I joined over 10 years ago: while looking for plants to refurbish a somewhat neglected garden on a tight budget I discovered the local HPS plant sale. What wonderful choice and quality! I wanted those sorts of plants. I joined the HPS and local South Pennine Group and received a Seed List. The selection of potential plants offered was mouth-watering. Since then I have regularly taken, and more recently contributed, seed. I still buy plants, but the ones that really excite me are those I have grown from seed. A recent tally revealed well over 120 different plants in my approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ acre suburban garden grown almost exclusively from HPS seed. This includes trees, shrubs, bulbs and alpines as well as hardy herbaceous plants.

But why garden from seed and not just buy plants or propagate by division or from cuttings? Growing plants from seed takes far more time and effort and the plants you get may not turn out to be what you expected. Clearly it is one way of filling a garden with plants on a budget. However, for me it is the excitement (and often challenge) of starting with a dry seed capsule, waiting for it to germinate, nurturing it on to flowering and finally seeing whether it is indeed what I anticipated – or something better.

What Should I Grow?

The excitement begins in December with the Seed List and finding what has been contributed. Choosing is great fun. As I read the list, names of plants heard at talks, seen on garden visits, or mentioned in books jump out. Others are completely unfamiliar. All are researched through books



Fig. 1 *Paeonia delavayi*,
P. veitchii, *P. veitchii* var.
woodwardii, *P. obovata*
var. *alba*

Barbara Matthewman

Barbara Matthewman

Barbara Matthewman

Barbara Matthewman

Barbara Matthewman



Fig. 2 One needs a bit of space.

and the internet with regard to colour, flower, growing conditions and propagation. I use the *RHS Encyclopedia of Garden Plants* and *Encyclopedia of Perennials*, and Phillips and Rix's *Perennials*, as well as monographs from the HPS, Plant Heritage and Timber Press on individual plant groups.

I get crazes for certain plants, such as irises, lilies, primulas, geums, and paeonies (fig. 1) and explore them through the seed list. I imagine the seeds

I will receive developing into a plant

with feathery, leathery, rough, smooth, grey, dark, light, or acid-green foliage and see it producing abundant beautiful, interesting or colourful flowers. It's what dreams are made of. Looking back at old lists I seem to have started ambitiously. I find I marked *cercis*, *cotinus*, *daphne*, *eremurus* and *kalmia* among others. I still have the *cotinus*. After many years it is about 10cm tall. These days, however, half the seed I choose is less challenging to germinate and likely to reach maturity slightly quicker. Experience has also taught me which types of plants are easier to grow. For instance peonies, though slow to germinate, seem easy, as are primulas, roscoeas and erythroniums.

What Do I Need?

What then does one need to garden from seed? In hardware terms, one needs a bit of space. I have a lot of space outside my back door (fig. 2). This enables me to grow plants that take a long time to germinate and flower: peonies, lilies, irises, erythroniums, trilliums, trees and shrubs (figs 3 & 4). It also means that I grow more than is sensible. So a lot of space is not necessarily good. I do not have a greenhouse, nor do I use a cold frame. Everything is grown 'hard', i.e. out in the open, in all

Barbara Matthewman



Fig. 3 *Cistus*

Barbara Matthewman



Fig. 4 *Phlomis russeliana*

weathers. One needs pots and compost. I recycle pots from friends who have bought plants from plant sales, garden centres and nurseries. They are delighted to get rid of them. Compost on the other hand is a very personal thing. Most people who grow plants from seed or cuttings have their own special mix. That is something that develops with time and experience, and should not worry a beginner. My personal mix, for what it's worth, comprises 5 units by volume of peat-free compost, 3 units of John Innes seed compost and a generous unit of grit. Again my idiosyncrasy is first to line the base of my pot with a piece of newspaper to prevent grit and soil escaping followed by a layer of grit to stabilise the pot and prevent the roots as they grow down from getting waterlogged and rotting. Then comes compost, seed, and a layer of grit on top of the seed to try to reduce the problem of moss, especially on plants that take forever to germinate. Finally I have started covering the pots with plastic mesh to prevent the local wild life from digging or upturning them.

Pricking out seedlings is another matter and I am still learning. I use the same compost mix and add slow release fertiliser. The real challenge is to catch the seedlings at the right stage. I have been told to transplant when the seed leaves are well developed and the first true leaf has appeared. I always leave it too long hoping for a few more to germinate. As a result I sometimes lose quite a few seedlings!

However, to grow plants from seed successfully, some software is also essential. First of these is patience. Gardening from seed is not instant gardening. Most hardy perennial seed will not appear for at least a couple of months and many for two, three, even four years. Similarly with flowering. Trilliums (fig. 5) will need at least 5–6 years. But there are lots of exciting plants that are much quicker – *Agastache foeniculum* with its anise-scented leaves, *Papaver ruprifragum*, *Meconopsis cambrica* ex Frances Perry, *Geum coccineum* (fig. 6), *Lychnis alpina* and *L. chalcedonica* (fig. 7), violas, *Geranium psilostemon*, *GG wallichianum* and *nodosum*. The list goes on.

Second is a willingness to learn from books, people and experience. For instance, when should I sow my seed? Books will tell me. They will also tell me where the



Fig. 5 Trilliums

Barbara Matthewman

Fig. 6 *Geum coccineum*

Barbara Matthewman

Barbara Matthewman



Fig. 7 *Geranium pratense* Striatum, G. *psilostemon* and *Lychnis chalconica*

plant originates from, which can give a clue. Plants from alpine regions will probably need to be exposed to frost and cold and need to be sown in the winter, those from more southerly regions in late March/April. Recently a seed-growing friend mentioned keeping *Aconitum* seed received in January/February in the fridge until the following autumn. In my experience many hardy perennials do seem to germinate better from an autumn sowing. Being systematic is also an advantage. As germination periods vary I keep pots in date order and try to ensure they are properly labelled.

Finally, one needs a certain degree of optimism to deal with disappointments, such as the failure of seed of longed-for plants to germinate, the destruction of prized seedlings by marauding slugs, snails or other wildlife, losses due to over- or under-watering or the weather, the failure of plants to survive inexpert potting up or transplanting, or to thrive when planted out...

Why Grow from Seed?

Since gardening from seed involves more time and effort than buying plants from plant sales, specialist nurseries or garden centres, what advantages does it have? The most obvious one is cost. 'Production' costs are minimal and a sowing usually produces more than one plant. This allows group planting for a fuller effect (fig. 7), which would be too expensive for me if bought as mature plants. Some of my plantings are experimental. A gardening friend once told me to put one plant where experts said it would grow, one where I thought it might grow and one where I

Barbara Matthewman



Fig. 8 *Agapanthus*

Barbara Matthewman



Fig. 9 Asiatic primula

wanted it to grow. Growing from seed generally gives me enough plants to do just that. Then, probably like many others, I have lost plants either because of the weather (too dry, wet, hot, cold) or because I have planted them in the wrong place or left them too long in the pot before planting out. The loss of a plant I have grown from seed is a personal disappointment, but I can try again at minimal cost. It took me three attempts to establish *Lunaria rediviva*. The first two batches died in their pots from drought followed by over-watering. Then some perennials are not very perennial at all. My first planting of *Morina longifolia* disappeared without trace after the first flowering. However, the second batch has not just survived for a second year, one plant has now got two crowns – and I grow plants annually just in case. Growing from seed provides readily available replacement stock. And finally, surplus plants can either be welcome gifts or sold at plant fairs.

The second, and for me greater, advantage is the selection of plants. The various growing conditions in my garden (semi-woodland, dry shade, rockery, shrub border, herbaceous border) require a wide range of plants and I am constantly experimenting. The areas under my trees are particularly challenging, but I can be more relaxed about trying out plants grown from seed in these conditions. These areas are now underplanted with thalictrums, aquilegias, hellebores, dracocephalums, campanulas, *Geranium nodosum*, erythroniums and *Fritillaria meleagris*, all grown from HPS seed. I also love paeonies and hanker for unusual bulbs: erythroniums, trilliums, lilies, *Paradisea lusitanica* and *Agapanthus* (fig. 8). But I cannot guarantee the right growing conditions and would not risk losing a costly bought collection. However, growing from seed allows me to experiment.

I always take the Distributor's Mix offered in the seed distribution for the thrill of the unexpected. It introduces plants I would never have dreamt of growing. Some I still would not dream of growing but others have been fantastic, such as a lovely pale salmon Asiatic primula (fig. 9) or just curious, such as an arisaema. This approach does have its problems. There are plants I would not be without that I have been unable to identify, or that I know are campanulas, primulas or dieramas (fig. 10), but not exactly which one.. The thrill of the unexpected also makes me occasionally take seed offered from cultivars that are unlikely to come true from

Fig. 10 *Dierama*Fig. 11 *Meconopsis cambrica*
Frances Perry



© Barbara Matthewman

Fig. 12 Sedum



© Barbara Matthewman

Fig. 13 Pacific Coast hybrid iris

seed either because they are deliberate hybrids, such as astrantias, or because they hybridise too freely, like aquilegias. But the surprises are worthwhile. I get unexpected colours and forms, particularly with the aquilegias but also for instance with *Meconopsis cambrica* 'Frances Perry' (fig. 11), which gave me a range of dark orange verging on red in single and double form. Unfortunately I planted them in the wrong place and lost the best. However, I will try again, and probably again after that. That's the joy of gardening from seed – it's easy to try again.

So far I have just talked about plants grown from HPS seed. There are other sources: other societies, commercial seed suppliers, one's own and friends' gardens. Some seedlings in my garden are self-sown – *Paeonia ludlowii* and *Smyrniun perfoliatum*, which came courtesy of the local birds – or from plants that annoyingly I fail to find the seed of myself, such as hebes, *Potentilla fruticosa*, *Primula vulgaris*, various sedums (fig. 12) and *Cyclamen hederifolium*. I always keep some of the seed collected for the HPS seed distribution for my own use, in case I lose a plant, or want to propagate it for a plant sale, or just to see what will come up. To date my two most exciting 'creations' are a dark-leaved pink *Geranium pratense* Victor Reiter Junior

strain series and a beautiful soft orange Pacific Coast hybrid iris (fig. 13). After all, many of our prized cultivars are either chance seedlings found by sharp-eyed plantspeople or deliberate hybrids. The Victorian nurserymen, who took seed from plant hunters and skilfully experimented with germination, number among my gardening heroes together with the plant hunters themselves.

Gardening from seed may not be for those who are purist, particularly about plant or cultivar names. However, it should suit those perhaps on a limited budget, who like to experiment and learn, are curious and adventurous with plants, and want to grow a wide range of plants and species. 🐛

Barbara Matthewman masterminds the HPS Seed Distribution. For details of how to obtain, and donate, your seed, please see www.hardy-plant.org.uk or the July 2010 newsletter.

All the plants shown were grown from HPS seed and flourish in Barbara's garden.