

It seems to me . . .

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Grasses dominate the new Tom Stuart-Smith lakeside borders at RHS Wisley

Leaning over a pavement on the way to the village is a mature mahonia. Its evergreen leaves are glossy and gently serrated and, in late winter, the soft yellow flowers perfume the air delightfully. I should want one in my own garden, but I don't like mahonias. Why? I couldn't honestly say.

We're keen gardeners, shouldn't we love all plants? Am I alone in having plant hates?

Take orchids for instance. Well, not the short spiky ones appearing mysteriously in damp meadows,

those are fine. But the big, exotic things beloved by florists, they're something else. Turning up as visitors' presents, they lord it over their little pots, tall and elegant, and destined to last a long, long time. The things leer at me and I hate them, at the same time reproaching myself for an unwarranted antipathy. A particularly day-glo pink one lasted for so many weeks, in desperation I put it out in the greenhouse, whereupon the high light levels did for it in days. Result: guilt and relief mingled.

Carnivorous plants don't leer so suggestively. No, these unpleasant personalities simply give the impression they would get you if they could. There's a discernibly dalek air about them. If you ever have the misfortune to visit a greenhouse full of carnivorous plants, be warned – the air stinks of stagnant water, and you'll feel lucky to get out alive.

Some poisonous plants too seem to have an air of menace about them. Perhaps it's a well-intentioned warning. Daturas (now brugmansias) are beautiful, and their proud owners often rave about them. I find them unsettling. You really don't need to be told how toxic they are, somehow they're already letting you know. "Don't mess with me, buster." Early in my gardening life I grew thorn apples from seed, having read that they were beautiful. They were too. Pale blue trumpets, elegant and unusual enough to boast about. I rooted them out in full flower, and burnt them. They were just so sinister.

Maybe this was an understandable enmity, the things being deadly poisonous. But might there be an unworthy rationale behind other plant dislikes? Could it

perhaps be... snobbery? Begonias, for instance. Can't stand 'em. Big and blowsy, and in colours so loud road workmen could do away with fluorescent jackets and just carry bunches of begonias to announce their presence. They'd be perfectly safe. They shout from tubs and hanging baskets (the begonias, not the workmen) and even little ones manage to be charmless, with their stiff, fleshy leaves and stalks.

Then there are plants that shun us and our gardens, and it's surely okay to hate them back. Hostas won't grow in this garden, after thirty years there can be no doubt about it. Christopher Lloyd's wise advice was that you should try growing a plant three times, and after that say, "Well, I never really wanted to grow it anyway", and go on to something else. I would add that it's also helpful to cultivate a dislike of the recalcitrant plant. I'm a rhodo hater, and don't care for heathers either. But then they wouldn't grow in my conditions. Actually that's not quite true. I once bought a heather because of the person it was named after, and got it established halfway down the drive. Every time I passed the thing, flowering away happily, I felt schizophrenic about it. I may not like heathers, but this one really liked me. It must have caught the eye though of someone who came down the drive with a trowel and dug it up. It remains the only plant that's ever been stolen from the garden. Ruddy heather fanciers, I fumed to myself. What do you expect? It wasn't replaced.

How about those plants though that everyone else raves about, and you try to warm to but somehow never manage? Grasses, for instance. I just don't care for grasses. There, I've said it, a confession akin to a woman declaring she doesn't like babies. (Well, as it happens... No, best leave that one alone.) With a few honourable exceptions such as *Carex oshimensis* 'Evergold', grass roots tend to have territorial ambitions, they seed like crazy, and look untidy most of the year. If I wanted beds full of grasses I could just give up on the weeding for a while. And it's no good pointing out all the good ones, the fact is I'm just prejudiced.

Mophead hydrangeas are a dislike which is probably a combination of ascetics (they look so awful in winter) and snobbery – how come everyone has one by the front door, do they ward off burglars or something? I grow and enjoy *Hydrangea arborescens* 'Annabelle' however, with its delicate greeny-cream flowers in late summer. It's a plant first encountered years ago in a Welsh garden, to which I had been taken by an acquaintance. The owner was a friend of hers, and as we toured the garden on narrow paths, they were behind me. I heard one say, 'Poor Annabelle, she has such weak legs', and thought they were talking about someone they both knew. Perhaps I wasn't far wrong. Plants do have personalities, so maybe it's natural that we don't like every one. After all we pick and choose our friends. 🐞

Alex Pankhurst