

# A gardener's bookshelf

Tim Ingram

Books on plants proliferate almost as much as plants themselves, and are as much loved by many gardeners. A well-thumbed copy of Graham Stuart Thomas's classic *Perennial Garden Plants* (or *The Modern Florilegium*) will be on most Hardy Planters' shelves. Along with *Ingwersen's Manual of Alpine Plants* and *Hillier's Manual of Trees and Shrubs*, it was a revelation to me in my early gardening life. Indeed, I began to underline the names of plants as we put them in the garden! Did I have ambitions beyond our relatively small garden? If so, I am sure I am not alone.

I was fascinated to read about rare or new plants I hadn't come across: obscurities (such as *Milligania longifolia* from Tasmania, which I later saw in the wild, and grew with seed from Jack Drake's famous nursery at Aviemore); species of well-known genera that were rarely available from nurseries (for example, *Aster sericeus* and *Dicentra macrantha*); and particularly noteworthy cultivars and varieties. Partly this was the collector's instinct, partly a desire to grow plants different from those in other gardens, and partly scientific fascination. I am still enthralled by the diversity and magic of the botanical world.

Plants in themselves are beautiful, but need care and culture. They come from further afield than a garden centre, and have their own history. They have obvious, and sometimes not so obvious, relationships with one another, and herein lies a whole world of botany. And they are part of a wider ecology, specifically of pollinating insects, birds and mammals. Who would think that a garden could delve so deeply. It is our own little piece of the world. There are also the connections that gardeners make with each other: the plants that remind you of friends, the sharing of seed, the recognition of trials and tribulations, and the friendly rivalry.

It is books that guide us, bringing together a store of experience in a way that otherwise only a long apprenticeship could do. Those who are lucky enough to have taken up gardening at an early age have the greatest opportunities to develop those famous 'green fingers'. But there is no doubt books can inspire, and, at different times, different books will wield their influence.

Few books encompass the whole garden, and in a truly scholarly way. My favourite has to be *The Living Garden* by E. J. Salisbury, one-time Professor of Botany at University College, London and Director of Kew. First published in 1935, it provides a solid scientific foundation. It is worth reading alone for the aphorisms that head each chapter: thus famously from Oscar Wilde, 'Experience is a name everyone gives to their mistakes'. My favourite is: 'Science is a first rate piece of furniture for a man's upper chamber, if he has common sense on the ground floor'. And the book is written for those of us who enjoy the nitty gritty of gardening, whilst at the same time wanting to learn more.

Christopher Lloyd and Beth Chatto are *de rigueur* for any true gardener. The latter has had

the most influence on me, partly because our garden is also relatively dry and sunny, and partly because I admire her seemingly effortless skill at bringing plants together so artistically. Christopher Lloyd's writings lift you into different world of gardening, now so brilliantly sustained by Fergus Garrett. A friend has described Dexter as "terrifying" and I know what she means: the extraordinary flamboyance of the plantings are way beyond what most of us could manage, and we can only look on with awe. However, to read *The Well-Tempered Garden* and *The Adventurous Gardener* sets us off in the right direction, even if our circumstances, and natural abilities, are less extraordinary! And Christopher Lloyd, for all his provocative and strong views, was a huge inspiration for the individual gardener, that is, the 'individualism' of the gardener, which is a rare talent.

The nurseries associated with Great Dexter and Beth Chatto's garden stress the importance of propagating and distributing plants, one of the most valuable functions of our gardens. Unlike the painters of the past who had to grind their own pigments, modern gardeners simply consult their copy of *Plant Finder* and pick up the phone! For those who make their living from propagating plants, seed lists and propagation manuals have particular importance. I have found several invaluable. Even for the amateur, the *Nursery Stock Manual* (1975), based on research at the Kinsealy Agricultural Institute in Dublin, is extremely useful on propagating woody plants. Another classic, *Propagation of Trees, Shrubs and Conifers* by Wilfred Sheat, may seem outdated, but it is packed with information, and describes techniques still relevant today. Both books stress the importance of timing to obtain good results and give detailed advice for individual species and genera.

One of my interests is alpine plants, and the classic guide is *The Propagation of Alpines* (1950) by Lawrence Hills, especially famed for founding the Henry Doubleday Research Association (now Garden Organic). Again, though outdated in many ways, it is packed with information.

A member of the HPS, Peter Thompson was and is highly respected. Probably his greatest achievement was initiating more systematic studies on seed germination and storage at Kew, which has led on to the renowned Seed Bank at Wakehurst Place. *Creative Propagation*, first published in 1989 and since thoroughly revised and extended, is hugely valuable for its wide and detailed coverage of all types of plants and for its highly intelligent and readable style. For any gardener wanting to multiply their plants, it should be the first port of call.

One can only marvel at a partnership like Martyn Rix and Roger Phillips. Combining potted biographies of plants with comprehensive illustrations is an exciting mix for the armchair gardener. As with Graham Stuart Thomas's treatise, I found myself drawn to plants that were new to me, for example the yellow *Morina coulteriana* or the robust *Corydalis nobilis*, both of which I have tried to grow, unsuccessfully. Seeing plants in their native settings is especially inspiring, and its omission a great failing of most television gardening programmes. Knowledge of plants in their natural habitats can only increase our skills and result in more diverse and exciting gardens throughout the country.

It takes a long while to become so immersed in one's garden that somehow it begins to take

on a life of its own and leads you by the hand. Writing that portrays this individual sense of the garden is rare. *A Gentle Plea for Chaos* by Mirabel Osler is a fine example, as is the journal *Hortus*, edited by David Wheeler. My favourite is *Cuttings from a Rock Garden – Plant Portraits and Other Essays*, by H L and L L Foster, pre-eminent members of the American Rock Garden Society. Although, like such specialist plant societies in the UK, it has a relatively small membership, its significance must be out of all proportion to its numbers.

North America is so vast and has such a varied and fascinating flora that one senses that gardeners there are pioneers. A lovely and rare book, written by a rancher in South Dakota, Claude A. Barr, entitled simply *Jewels of the Plains*, details his experiences discovering and growing the wild flowers where summer temperatures can top 38°C and annual rainfall drop to 30cm. He supplied many as plants or seed from his Prairie Gem Ranch, and must have opened many eyes to the beauties of their native flora. Enthusiastic gardeners will have been inspired by specialist nurseries, but few nurserymen write as evocatively of the plants they grow and love.

Before leaving America I must mention *Rocky Mountain Alpines*, published to record the Alpines '86 Conference. Its presentation and coverage has yet to be equalled: it details the geography and climate of the Rockies and the native flora throughout their range, and then, tantalisingly, the cultivation of these plants around the world.

It will be apparent that books on plants are as integral to my garden as the plants themselves! My favourites have been consulted time and again, but I have innumerable monographs and floras that appeal in a more academic way. Sometimes they also link to my garden, as with *Snowdrops* by Matt Bishop, Aaron Davis and John Grimshaw: it is a winter delight to pick out stories about one of the mounting collection outside, and especially on any new acquisitions! Similarly I have learnt greatly from Jack Elliott's *Bulbs for the Rock Garden*, which details his huge experience of growing bulbs both common and rare. Jack was as generous with his plants as with his knowledge and we were fortunate in Kent to have such an inspirational gardener, and also the combination of Elizabeth Strangman and Graham Gough at the famous Washfield Nursery in Hawkhurst, whose legacy continues in many of our gardens.

My final choice is historical. Garden styles and fashions have never greatly interested me, seeming more to do with wealth and power than with plants, but in *The Naming of Names*, Anna Pavord takes an extraordinary journey through two millennia of writing about and illustrating plants. It overwhelms with information, yet I found it compelling reading, and will have to read it again more slowly. Passion, individuality, and a desire to understand plants have always been with us.

Yes, great books have been written, but it is the gardens they engender, small or large, that really capture our hearts. 🌱

**Tim Ingram** believes that with all the books he has delighted in, his garden should be as exemplary as Kew or Wisley, beautifully labelled and not a weed in sight. His only excuse that this is not so is that he spends too much time reading!