

# Pleasant surprises

Janet Sleep

My programme of introducing better shrubs to the garden has in recent years been accompanied by better underplanting of the woodland-understorey sort. Much of this has entailed risk of some kind: either I am unfamiliar with that genus and what exactly it will put up with, or I know full well that it will not take kindly to our pernicious droughts and bitter easterly winds in winter. Has this stopped me? What do you think?

I started with some things that I knew would never fail. Even then, when they went dormant in the summer, I could never quite believe that they would return on cue, and every time I get a shock of the pleasantest kind to see my old friends reappear. I now have a good collection of *Cyclamen*, ideal amongst shrubs as long as you do not plan to dig there and it is not too shady. They are not good mixers in an herbaceous border but associate well with shrubs and other tough bulbs that need little coddling. Other bomb-proof bulbs for late winter include *Corydalis*, *Scilla* and *Chionodoxa* and these are followed by the dwarf *Anemone blanda* and *A. nemorosa* which are equally easy. They tumble around at ankle height and have the merit of tidying away their own foliage quite neatly in fairly short order. Blue and white tends to dominate here (you will get a really intense royal blue from the earlier *Scilla bifolia*) but pink can be had too. *Chionodoxa* ‘Pink Giant’ really is pink, though ‘Giant’ does stretch it a bit and *Corydalis solida* ssp. *solida* ‘Beth Evans’ is a delightful pale pink over typical delicate foliage. They bulk up swiftly too.

*Hepaticas*, I knew, would be more problematic, so I started with seed of *H. nobilis* (fig. 1) and hoped for the best. Germination was poor, as with much bought-



Fig. 1 Brilliant pink *Hepatica nobilis* – early food for the bees.



Fig. 2 *Hacquetia epipactis* ‘Thor’.



Fig. 3 *Cardamine glanduligera*.



Fig. 4 Flowering stems of pollarded *Acer negundo* 'Kelly's Gold'.

in seed, but I did manage to get a few to flowering size, amongst which was this brilliant pink form – it takes me by surprise every time it flowers. The good news is that once you have your plant in situ, growing first in a well-drained pot, it will seed itself profusely into the gravel topping and you then have a ready-made supply of seedlings to risk in the general garden.

I bought *Hacquetia epipactis* 'Thor' (fig. 2) because of its silver-edged foliage, and because it would flower really early. But I feared that it might not stand our summers here any too well; it looked much too aristocratic to put up with the rough and ready treatment that it would get from me. It did take two years to flower, but came through the 2009–10 severe winter having doubled in size. An unexpected bonus was that the little green ruffs are silvered too – very pretty.

I knew that the *Cardamine* family likes it positively wet. In drought-ridden East Anglia, trying to grow any of them was going to be a challenge, particularly as I had no intention of making a bog garden and the plant would have to survive in a shady corner of good, heavy soil. When my first planting of *Cardamine glanduligera* (fig. 3) died down in the summer, as it does, I had no great expectation that I would ever see it again. A hard winter followed, then by some sort of alchemy the plant reappeared, making a very pretty mat out of my single potful. It has the prettiest of fretted leaves and a sprinkling of blue/purple flowers. It is a delight.

March this year pulled off another coup de theatre. I have an *Acer negundo* 'Kelly's Gold' (fig. 4) which I pollard every year at about 2m, but this time I had done a rather skimpy job and left one or two of the younger stems uncut. Reader, they flowered, and in such spectacular fashion that I think the term 'surprised' is hardly sufficient – 'Star-struck' is nearer the mark. I



Fig. 5 Barnhaven primulas.

shall be leaving my pruning of this particular plant until much later in the year from now on. The acer occupies space in one of my two main mixed beds and there is an easy spring underplanting here that anyone could emulate. Years ago I obtained several packets of Barnhaven seed and put out plants in the various colour breaks at different points in the borders hoping to avoid a garish mixture (fig. 5). I did not expect them to last all that long given my experience with bought-in plants, but the good news is that these strains are irrepressible. Since then they have done their own thing with a will: the colours have developed into a kind of gentle tapestry and the plants have spread throughout the borders with no help from me. Each year I think that I have lost them, for they defoliate dreadfully in our dry summers, but every March and April they wash the borders with colour. Thank you Barnhaven.



Fig. 6 *Sanguinaria canadensis* f. *multiplex* 'Plena' with *Corydalis* and *Erythronium* foliage in Richard Hobbs's garden.



Fig. 7 *Erythronium* 'Joanna' – a robust hybrid.



Fig. 8 *Trillium chloropetalum* in its white form. The flowers have a distinctive purple flush at the base. Beth Chatto's garden.



Fig. 9 Diminutive, double *Anemonella* 'Betty Blake'.

I have been experimenting with two shade lovers lately. *Sanguinaria* is best in its sterile, double form – *S. canadensis* f. *multiplex* 'Plena' – as its pure white blooms last a fair bit longer (fig. 6). Erythroniums, which often have ornamental mottled leaves below stems topped with elegantly recurved pink, yellow or white flowers, come in at about the same time. Like cyclamen, I have found that erythroniums appreciate mulching rather than soil disturbance and are best left alone. They seem to appreciate a period of drying out in the summer dormant period. They can be slow to increase, however, so I was pleased to find that *E.* 'Joanna', a creamy pink hybrid, bulked up much more quickly (fig. 7).



Fig. 10 *Clematis* grown from seed and flowering in May on a south wall – possibly *C. chiisanensis*.

In trying *Trilliums*, I realise that I'm probably pushing my luck a little too far. They are painfully slow in any case, and need that idealised, rich, moist but well-drained soil. Who has this please? Send me some. But I reckon that if Mrs. Chatto can succeed in her dry Essex woodland, then I have at least half a chance of success. She seems to be the only source in the *Plant Finder* for the splendid white form of *T. chloropetalum* (fig. 8), seen here with some sumptuous late hellebores in her shade garden. Unfortunately, they are never for sale

when one asks – perhaps one day. I am told that trilliums will bulk up faster if one can keep them going by plying them with water to extend their growing season. This also applies to the sweet little anemonellas, seen in all their perfection at the Harrogate Show this year. *Anemonella thalictroides* ‘Betty Blake’ tends to stick around longer, because it too is sterile as the flowers are doubled (fig. 9). This should give it more of a chance with me, but only time will tell.

By mid-April last year, after our worst winter in thirty years, the garden was in full flood. Many plants that had not died seemed to have performed twice as well. A delightful surprise was the first flowering of some *Clematis* grown from seed (fig. 10). These were meant to be *C. ochotensis* but I think are more likely to be *C. chisanensis* given the heavily keeled sepals. My *Paeonia*



Fig. 11 *Paeonia mlokosewitschii* in its second year from planting in a free-draining, sunny, raised bed.



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Fig. 12 *Crinodendron hookerianum* in May, showing no signs of a hard winter. It forms flower buds in the autumn so its abundant flowering is a bit of a mystery.



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Fig. 13 *Piptanthus nepalensis* flowering profusely after a blistering winter. Note the lack of a warm wall.

*mlokosewitschii* (fig. 11) (bought as something entirely different) produced nine blooms in only its second year, and two supposedly borderline hardy evergreen shrubs, *Crinodendron hookerianum* and *Piptanthus nepalensis* (figs 12 & 13), not only unaccountably survived but flowered their heads off. Now that was a surprise. 🐛

**Janet Sleep** has been planting up a new shrub and shade garden along the line of an old ditch, so she is anticipating the spring with even more impatience than usual.