

Some good new plants

Bob Brown

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Fig. 1 *Bergenia* 'Claire Maxine'

The *Bergenia* Trial at Wisley was a revelation to me. I had begun to return to them – prompted by *Bergenia* 'Overture' – but by the end of the 3-year trial I realised (like the rest of the judges) how much wonderful variation there is, how many varieties there are, how good things which gardeners never consider such as *summer foliage* can be, and, inevitably, how awful many of them are. The awful ones are the ones I grew up with and sadly they are still the most widespread. On the whole their winter foliage doesn't colour well and looks messy. I'm sure that they – *Bergenia cordifolia*, *Bergenia crassifolia* and *Bergenia* x *schmidtii* – adversely influence most people's opinions of bergenias. If you have unexciting bergenias they are probably these, and this is partly a plea to replace them.

So what's good (and new)? *Bergenia* 'Claire Maxine' (fig. 1) has lovely puckerred foliage, as good in summer as in winter, and tall red-pink flowers to 55cm. 'Eden's Dark Margin' (fig. 2) is similar and has slightly orangey-red puckerred shiny foliage in winter and normal good pink flowers. Part of the judging process in the trial looked at whether the flowers suffered frost damage. Some are more damaged than others and some avoid damage by having flowers late enough to miss the frost. *Bergenia* 'Overture' must be the best example of this. The worst winter foliage was green and/or frost blackened, apparently limp and flaccid (but actually turgid but very relaxed!). The best winter foliage took on shine – maybe, not to exaggerate too much, a sparkle – and sat up and looked at you.

Two need mention because of their flowers. 'Bach' (fig. 3) isn't new (it was selected by Eric Smith of the Plantsman Nursery) but it's rarely grown. It has unusual flowers – white, and densely held in large *crassula*-like heads. *B. stracheyi* 'Ice Queen' has

amazing pale green flowers that look out at you (with posy-like leaves that change from bronze to green at flowering time).

These are tough plants that will grow anywhere. In my youth, my family left one on a path for several years and it flowered every year. But don't be cavalier. *Bergenia purpurascens* is (in my opinion) a lime hater and loathes my highly alkaline clay, taking maybe 8 years to die. I can only grow its varieties in pots. *Bergenia purpurascens* var. *delavayi* and *B. 'Glasnevin'* (fig. 4) were awarded AGMs in the trial. Their winter colour is a slightly bluish red. The leaves are simple oval shapes and stand to attention. They look magnificent with snowdrops. The other planting fact to bear in mind is that although toughness and tolerance have meant that bergenias are traditionally planted in dry shade under trees, such a position reduces their effectiveness: the tree canopy gives slight cold protection and keeps light levels lower – neither of which leads to good winter colouring. So I now restrict such planting to the old variety 'Ballawley' (which has very good summer foliage and only slightly better winter foliage). The best new varieties need exposure to light and frost, and lots of admiring glances from passers-by.

Another good new plant, *Aquilegia 'Fruit and Nut Chocolate'* (fig. 5), was bred here. Its mother was an *Aquilegia* species from California (sold to me as *Aquilegia brevistyla*) that grew and flowered in winter. Such behaviour is not unusual where winter rains and summer droughts are the norm. Its father was the dumpy brown-and-green-flowered *Aquilegia viridiflora*. Several seeds resulted, but only one plant that, to my astonishment, began to flower in late December and finish at winter's end in mid-March. I was doubtful about the hardiness of such a plant but, after it sailed through two

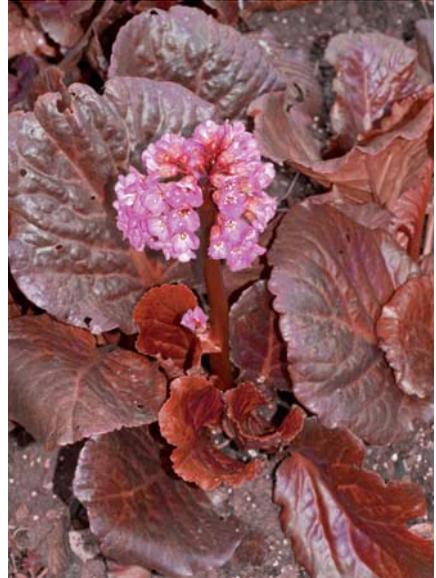


Fig. 2 *Bergenia 'Eden's Dark Margin'*



Fig. 3 *Bergenia 'Bach'*



Fig. 4 *Bergenia purpurascens* 'Glasnevin'

winters in one year (2010), I can attest that it is! I can see flower buds as I write at the end of January 2011. My second fear was that propagation would be a problem. However, seed is produced (it might have been sterile) and the resulting plants are 100% true. How can that be possible? Surely even if it's self-fertile and no other aquilegias are flowering at the time, the characteristics of the grandparents or great aunts might appear. They don't. The leaves are prettier than other aquilegias with a maroon-brown margin. The flowers have red-brown petals and remarkable violet sepals. It also is a survivor – I still have the original plant from 2006. To top all this there is a faint perfume. Serendipity.

I am very wary about (my) good opinions of *new* plants. Like anyone else I'm susceptible to novelty, and anything that's "new, rare and unusual" immediately catches my attention, whereas I might well dismiss a new form of an old, well-tried-and-tested favourite as old hat. Remember, plants which are new, rare and unusual, are often new, rare and unusual because they've been grown in the past and been found to be no damned good and then forgotten. So including *Podophyllum versipelle* 'Spotty Dotty' (fig. 6) as the best spring flowering perennial ever when it only came to my attention in 2005 is chancing my arm.

But it's superb. It's everything I always wanted in a perennial. It has incredibly dramatic foliage that looks wonderful in spring and almost as superb ten months later. Each shapely leaf is large and held flat to the sky with its leaf stalk in the middle underneath and concentric patterns of purple-brown across its surface. The flowers are also large, a seductive deep maroon, and are



Fig. 5 *Aquilegia* 'Fruit and Nut Chocolate'

held in thick bunches beneath the leaf so you catch enticing glimpses of them – very pornographic and Victorian. Many of the most enticing plants available to us are either difficult to grow or require unusual or expensive growing conditions. This plant is easy,

adaptable and vigorous – so good and so easy that it must surely be heading for the ‘Dead Common’ category.

I got *Aster* ‘Pixie Red Eye’ (fig. 7) from Viv Marsh back in October 2003. I seem to remember his saying it had been bred by an Israeli nursery (who specialised in cut flowers). This is pretty startling information. An Israeli aster! Wow! (I associate Israel neither with Michaelmas daisies nor cut flowers.) As far as asters go it’s almost the best thing to be bred since sliced bread was invented but it’s hardly available, and hardly grown. Are asters so unfashionable that no one has discovered it yet? I hope so! I can list its negative qualities: for me it is never high enough to qualify as a cut flower – just about reaching 60cm. But it’s not irruptive. It has no yellow eye to clash with the ray florets or disrupt colour schemes. Dead and dying flowers are hidden by new flowers overtopping them. It has no mildew. ‘Almost the best thing’ because it responds to careful cultivation in good, well-drained soil, and some new cultivars will even grow in dry shade. A very desirable plant.

Pericaria amplexicaulis ‘Blackfield’ (fig. 8) is one of Chris Ghyselen’s indestructible plants. His principle must be start with something that grows well

and never dies and make it look better. What a good place to begin. Chris is a garden designer (Diana, my wife, says he’s designing her next garden). His concern that the plants he recommends be indestructible is commendable. The species, *Pericaria amplexicaulis* from the Himalayas, is rather boring. It has a thin covering of wispy red



Fig. 6 *Podophyllum versipelle* ‘Spotty Dotty’



Fig. 7 *Aster* ‘Pixie Red Eye’



Fig. 8 *Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Blackfield'

flowers over plain foliage dusted with Hoover-bag emptyings. 'Blackfield' has lots of fat spikes of rich carmine red flowers over plain dark green foliage. Plant it, walk away, and return 50 years later (difficult for some) and it will still be there. A similar variety, 'JS Caliente' from Jan van Spruyt, is equally good. Two more good things to come out of Belgium. Use it in borders and shrubberies with whites and grey foliage around – it needs lifting because the colours are surprisingly recessive.

I suspect that *Yucca gloriosa* 'Bright Star' (fig. 9) is a sport in tissue culture from production of *Yucca gloriosa* 'Variegata'. I reckon most hardy planters will be familiar with 'Variegata'. As I write, it jumps to anyone's attention because not only is it evergreen (even ivy that's still green is noticeable round here) but it is a bright creamy-white and an astonishing

architectural shape. 'Bright Star' has rosettes of broad, glowing golden-yellow foliage that have coloured pinker as the temperature has dropped (anthocyanin – the colouring

– is an anti-freeze). Its exotic colouring and shape make it an unlikely candidate for extreme cold hardiness but it qualified by living through three punishing winters. In this, the latest winter, a potted specimen has shown damage, so maybe there's a warning there. I expect it to have autumn flower spikes like its sister clones, but my oldest plant isn't big enough to have flowered. Other variegated cultivars of *Yucca gloriosa* have thick, medium-tall heads of ivory-coloured flowers from August to November. I suspect this will be no different but it's the foliage, especially the winter foliage, and its architectural shape that make it a winner.

Hydrangeas are currently fashionable. Being fashionable is as dangerous a characteristic as is being new. But *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Zorro' (fig. 10) is



Fig. 9 *Yucca gloriosa* 'Bright Star'

amazing. It has glorious, stiff, thick, black stems and large heads of pink lacecap flowers in midsummer. The name is utterly appropriate. If the flowers are fertilized the whole head persists (going pinkish green) until winter. I cut it to the ground to within an inch of its life in spring to get stronger growth (a bit like coppicing paulownias or catalpas) and it still flowers. Its ability to flower on current year's growth is a wonderful leap forward in hydrangea breeding. *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Zebra' (fig. 11) has the same quality but is shorter (at 75cm), a mophead rather than a lacecap, and has white flowers. 'Sells on sight' is no exaggeration.



Fig. 10 *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Zorro'

Another new and garden-worthy shrub has come from the breeding programme of Peter Moore. He's been working on *Choisya* since before 1983, when 'Aztec Pearl' appeared. 'Aztec Pearl' is a cross between *Choisya ternata* and *Choisya arizonica* (now called *Choisya dumosa* var. *arizonica*) the latter giving the hybrid more fingered foliage and larger flowers than *Choisya ternata*. I've always favoured the *Choisya dumosa* var. *arizonica* as parent over all the others. It has really finely fingered foliage and relatively enormous flowers in the spring and early summer. Hailing from high winter-cold Arizona it's likely to be hardy, and eventually I spotted a mature specimen in a Cheltenham garden – old enough to have lived through tough winters and be mildly gawky and misshapen. This caused me to trim mine to a shapely 75cm. Now there is no need because a new Peter Moore hybrid called *Choisya* × *dewitteana* 'White Dazzler' (fig. 12) has everything I've always wanted. It has sailed through record punishingly low temperatures this winter Nov–Dec 2010 without any scorching. It's in a pot that is much more exposed than the surrounding shrubs with their roots snugly earth-bound. To illustrate



Fig. 11 *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Zebra'



Fig. 12 *Choisya x dewitteana*
'White Dazzler'

how cold it's been – locally, even the wild blackberries have no green foliage. It's developed a good shapely form, without secateurs, at under a metre (over the last 3 years). It has the best fingered, evergreen foliage and clusters of large scented flowers in both autumn and spring. Choisyas (like bergenias) are also tough, but in this case I reckon they *prefer* to be grown in dry shade, benefiting from both the summer dryness and winter shelter. This doesn't mean that they will not grow everywhere else.

Finally I must mention what I've christened *Phlox x arendsii* 'Autumn's Pink Explosion' (fig. 13). This is one of the seedlings from a cross made at Cotswold Garden Flowers in 1992 that's thriven in my very unsuitable soil since its inception. I hadn't noticed it until autumn 2010 when it hit me that it was in full flower in late



Fig. 13 *Phlox x arendsii* 'Autumn's Pink Explosion'.

October. The flowers are nothing special – there are gaps between the petals (which some people denigrate) and the colour is ordinary pink but, one, it lived (quite a feat on thick alkaline clay) and, two, it flowered in autumn (2010), not hanging on till autumn but definitely and decidedly flowering in autumn (2010). So (you ask), "Why haven't you noticed it in prior years if it's so good and unusual?" Well, it took me many years to notice *Muscari armeniacum* 'Christmas Pearl' doing its thing in the wrong season and I walked past an autumn-flowering *Lathyrus vernus* for ten years. I'm busy, my mind is busy and somehow such phenomena are shadowy.

These new plants all seem good to me. Time will tell. See what you think. 🐼

Bob Brown is slowly recovering from the awful winter, just like his plants.