

# Telling tales

Judy Harry

Having a garden as full of people as it is of plants (fig. 1) might mean that we were having a particularly successful Open Garden day. More realistically, it means that a lot of our plants either remind us of people that we have known and loved, or are associated with stories of famous personalities, both living and dead. It adds an extra dimension to our gardening, and is evidence of our growing experience.

I have a file labelled *Plant Identification* which contains a tangible record of this. As a comparative beginner, I became fascinated by some of the older named varieties of hardy perennials, and when I acquired one I made efforts to identify it correctly. I became very boring on the subject of correct nomenclature! One way of getting hold of a proper identification was by contacting plantsmen who had bred it, or who specialised in its genus, which proved to be not only educative but immensely enjoyable.

It all started with a viola, sent to me by my sister from near Aberdeen. In that part of the world, the spring markets featured a lovely bedding viola, *V.* ‘Inverurie Beauty’ (fig. 2), and she very kindly sent me a plant. It has good-sized flowers of a rich blue-mauve, a strong scent, and a lovely long stem which makes it ideal for cutting. It is also tough, because I still have it, twenty years later. My interest awakened, I got to know a specialist viola nursery and, finding that they did not list the variety, asked if they would like a plant. “Yes please, we’ll do a swap”. On a visit to Chelsea Flower Show some years later, I was delighted to find the variety prominently displayed on their stand: needless to say, I basked in the reflected glory. Talking to the owners, I heard that a well-known viola breeder, Richard Cawthorne, had had very bad luck, having unknowingly imported a polluted batch of sand



Fig. 1 My garden is as full of people as it is of plants.

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Fig. 2 *Viola* ‘Inverurie Beauty’ bred by the late Richard Cawthorne in the 1950s.

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Fig. 3 Like meeting the man who knew the woman who was sister...

for his propagation beds which had killed many of his stock and young plants. I sent off a letter full of sympathy, offering a plant of 'Inverurie Beauty', and enquiring if he knew it. His response:

Dear Mrs Harry, Thank you very much for your letter... and kind offer... It was actually bred by me back in the 1950s...

What excitement! It was like meeting the man who knew the woman who was sister to the one who danced with Lloyd George (fig. 3). He also explained how he had

improved on an original "very straggly" plant given to him by a friend from Inverurie, by crossing it with an old viola, 'Mauve Radiance', and selecting from the resulting F2 generation seedlings.



Fig. 4 Pinning down the identity of *Erigeron* 'Dignity' was an enjoyable exercise.

More sleuthing was to follow when my mother passed several plants on to me from her garden, which had been planted up in the 1960s. There were asters, phlox, and daisies of all sorts, and I was keen to find out about all of them. It immediately became clear that some of the names had drifted a bit from the original, and I particularly wanted to clarify the name of a lovely erigeron (fig. 4), which was very possibly one bred by Alan Bloom in the 1950s. It seemed that the best way to do this was to send him a piece of the plant in flower (fig. 5). By putting a piece of wet Oasis at one end of a clear plastic chocolate box (you know the ones, deliciously nutty and wrapped in gold foil) I was able to insert two flowering stems, and send off the box first class with accompanying letter and s.a.e. It apparently arrived as fresh as a daisy (of course) and we started a most enjoyable correspondence. The fact that we never quite pinned down the identity of the plant was incidental: it was a lot of fun, and when many years later, and not long before his death at the age of 98, I was privileged to visit our President Alan Bloom as chairman of the HPS, we were able to carry on where we left off. (In case you are wondering, he felt almost certain that it was *Erigeron* 'Dignity'.)



Fig. 5 The best way was to send him a piece of the plant in flower.

Among my mother's plants were various

Michaelmas daisies, and the obvious specialist to consult was Paul Picton, at Old Court Nurseries, who at that time was building up a collection of the so-called New York asters, *Aster novi-belgii*, and trying to correct their very muddled names. Off went more chocolate-box Wardian cases, followed in due course by plants of one or two varieties for his collection. *Aster novi-belgii* ‘Fellowship’ (fig. 6) was one of the many that he was good enough to identify for me and I grow and love it still. Flowering mid-season, it is tall, with generous branching stems of large, soft pink flowers that have a certain fluffiness about them. Whenever I went down to London for the HPS meetings that coincided with the RHS Great Autumn Show, I would be sure to meet happy gardeners coming away from Vincent Square carrying bags from which protruded the unmistakable flowers of this excellent aster.



Fig. 6 *Aster novi-belgii* ‘Fellowship’ bearing its fine pink flowers in September.



Fig. 7 Butterflies love the pure white *Aster novi-belgii* ‘Albanian’.

Another very good variety identified by Paul was the white *Aster n-b* ‘Albanian’ (fig. 7). This came from another of my ‘garden people’, a woman, or more properly a lady, who had moved to our village bringing many plants from her previous, people-stocked garden. Her recollection of plant names was rather hazy, and many seemed to be accompanied by the remark “Mother used to grow it” (fig. 8). Receiving plants from her put me on a steep learning curve and sometimes required tactful feedback. Early on, she handed me a plant with the confident assertion that it was called *Reflectrum*. It grew and prospered, and I started trying to find out more about it. Searches led me nowhere, until I ignored entries under ‘R’ and looked elsewhere. At last all fell into place when I stumbled upon the genus *Thalictrum*, for it was indeed *T. aquilegifolium* (fig. 9), a lovely plant which contributes much to the early summer garden. Passing on its true identity to my dear friend was a little tricky, for ironically she was a stickler for correct pronunciation, often bemoaning the careless speech of broadcasters, among others.

Also from a tiny cottage garden in the village came an obviously old variety of hardy chrysanthemum. It

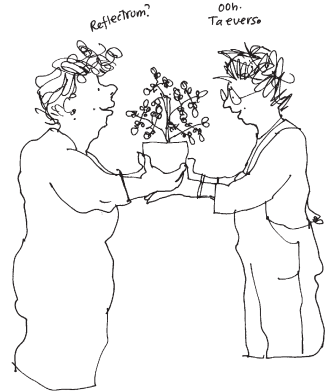


Fig. 8 “Mother used to grow it.”



Fig. 9 *Thalictrum aquilegifolium*, here in its white form, makes a valuable addition to the early summer garden.

was a momentous day when, having sent some to Judy Barker, it transpired that mine was identical to others she had collected and that they all stemmed from a plant long grown at Chelsea Physic Garden, whose name the variety now carries. Her work with some of the older hardy varieties has rightly been acclaimed, and I think of her every time I see the buds developing on *Chrysanthemum* ‘Chelsea Physic Garden’ (fig. 10), one of the HPS Conservation Scheme’s successes, and on the wonderfully floriferous *C.* ‘Nantyerry Sunshine’ (fig. 11) which she kindly gave me.

It is one of the regrettable truths of modern horticulture that the naming of commercially available plants can be as imprecise as that of gifts from amateur gardeners. A friend who worked in the trade gave me a plant labelled *Lonicera periclymenum* ‘Sweet Sue’ so that I could compare it with my old favourite *L. p.* ‘Graham Thomas’. When it came into flower I was a little perplexed by its colouring and its lack of scent, and my suspicions were confirmed when the donor came one day and pronounced it definitely not ‘Sweet Sue’. We both agreed to do some research and on our next meeting greeted each other with the cry “*Tellmanniana!*” (fig. 12). Hardy Planters are of course renowned for talking a strange language to each other. It is indeed *L. x tellmanniana* (fig. 13), a handsome, richly coloured and early-flowering

honeysuckle, and I am delighted to have it.



Fig. 10 *Chrysanthemum* ‘Chelsea Physic Garden’.



Fig. 11 Living up to its name, *Chrysanthemum* ‘Nantyerry Sunshine’ has become a favourite.

I do, of course, buy plants, and they bring with them the personalities of the nurserymen who grow and sell them. *Nepeta racemosa* ‘Walker’s Low’ (fig. 14) was in a consignment from a respected if outspoken grower of perennials with whom I had an enjoyable correspondence in the process of planning my order. It is, I think, the best of the catmints, with a



prolonged and abundant flowering habit, and I have it in more than one place in the garden. In one, it is illuminated by the setting summer sun, giving the plant a new and very exciting dimension. Of a similar colour, my current plant of the *cordifolius* hybrid *Aster* ‘Little Carlow’, came from the nursery at Great Dixter, now in the capable hands of Fergus Garrett, following the death of Christopher Lloyd. It is a wonderful plant, and the enthusiasm of its flowering seems to typify the enthusiasm of both Christopher and Fergus.

I was only able to make a visit to Barnsley House after the death of Rosemary Verey, but she lives on in two plants that I bought at the nursery there. They grow in a raised bed which faces due south and survive in bone-dry soil. They also happen to flower at the same time, which is a bonus. One is an erodium which was labelled *E. ‘Prestbury Hybrid’* but I was never able to find it in the *Plant Finder*, for example. However, researches on the Wonderful Worldwide Web<sup>1</sup> explained it all, and brought another ‘person’ into the picture. This erodium must have been bred by John Anton-Smith, whose Burnside garden<sup>2</sup> near Prestbury in Gloucestershire, is open to the public and if ever I am down that way I shall have to visit to fill in the gaps in the story. Whatever its name, I love it for its abundant pink flowers over finely cut silvery foliage. A trim after its first flush ensures that it produces further crops of flowers throughout the summer. Its partner is the beautiful, true blue, and frighteningly adventurous *Buglossoides purpureocaerulea* (fig.15), safely confined in a raised bed. It does, of course, fling out long stems which root as soon as they touch ground, but they are easily uprooted from the surrounding gravel.

It would not be fair to blame all misnaming on the trade, however. I too have been guilty of stupidly mixing up labels, or of optimistically thinking that I will remember what ‘that plant’ is, even though the label has faded and I have been too idle to rewrite it. Thus it was with the arisaema given to me as bulbils by a generous plantsman and HPS member who specialises in these intriguing plants. There were several different varieties, whose labels gradually started to migrate and/or fade, but eventually two of them became established in the garden, one with great



Fig. 12 Greeted each other with the cry “Tellmanniana!”



Fig. 13 Wrongly labelled, but *Lonicera x tellmanniana* was very welcome all the same.

<sup>1</sup> [www.manntaylor.com/glosplan2.html](http://www.manntaylor.com/glosplan2.html)

<sup>2</sup> [www.manntaylor.com/anton.html](http://www.manntaylor.com/anton.html)



Fig. 14 Placing *Nepeta racemosa* 'Walker's Low' where it is illuminated by the late afternoon sun has given it an exciting new dimension.

enthusiasm where it is colonising a patch of cool shade, and the other with admirable determination since it has in its lifetime been rather neglected, trodden on by the window cleaner (fig. 16) and half dug up by some passing animal (a badger? or a fox?). In 2010 it flowered magnificently and later produced a good spike of red berries. I think it is probably *A. consanguineum*. In case you are wondering why I should have put it where the window-cleaner can tread on it, I know that that spot in that border is one of the few places in this garden with conditions that will suit it.

Further along the same border is another gift plant, from a former HPS chairman, and it too is thriving. This is interesting, since *Reineckea carnea* (fig.17) prefers cool, acid conditions which makes me think that over the years the soil in this narrow, north-facing border has soured somewhat and so become acceptable to these interesting plants. Related to lily-of-the-valley, *Reineckea* spreads steadily, and only produces its stumpy pink flowers in late October or November. It may not be the showiest plant in the garden, but I value it highly as I do the late-flowering *Liriope* which I shall always associate with another of our former chairmen. So many plants, and so many lovely people.

I would guess that connections with HPS members and events provide us with the majority of our 'people plants': the Society is renowned for comfortably combining the social and the educational. Peruvian lilies of the old sort have the reputation of spreading



Fig. 15 Flowering reliably in a dry raised bed, *Erodium chrysanthum* 'Prestbury Hybrid' with *Buglossoides purpureo-caerulea*.



Fig. 16 Trodden on by the window cleaner.

uncontrollably so an unnamed alstroemeria, a gift from long-time friends and members of the Lincolnshire Group, is also confined within a raised bed. The conditions here are cool and damp at the roots but with afternoon sun, and the lilies follow on after daffodils and bluebells. The bed backs on to a brick barn, and on the wall is one of my favourite roses, *R.* ‘Phyllis Bide’, along with a *Clematis* ‘Bill MacKenzie’. They are both vigorous growers, of course, and the response of the alstroemeria has been to go by the principle of if you can’t beat ’em, join ’em; by July or August, the yellow flowers are trumpeting victoriously from among the climbers’ stems at a height of more than two metres, a wonderful sight (fig. 18).



Fig. 17 The golden form of *Lysimachia nummularia* has taken on pink tints to better partner *Reineckea carnea*.

In a much drier and sunbaked spot is a precious little group of *Sternbergia lutea*, pictured flourishing in France in the last issue of the journal, and given to me on a lecturing visit to Northern Ireland. With the reassuring appearance of their leaves each year, I am reminded of the donor, a man of infinite plant knowledge and quiet generosity, and also of Sir Frederick Stern, in whose famous garden, Highdown, I first saw these lovely flowers on the Autumn Weekend in 2003.

Planted in the shelter of a south-facing border in front of our house is a fine bush of *Ageratina ligustrina* (fig.19). Seen for the first time on the 1999 Autumn Weekend, and identified by a much more knowledgeable member by its former name of *Eupatorium ligustrinum*, I took a great fancy to it. Vowing to get hold of a plant, I was delighted to find it at a Lincolnshire HPS member’s nursery. It has exceeded all expectations; some years its evergreen foliage simply needs a spring tidying, while after a more severe winter, more drastic pruning is required. It always grows away strongly and by the autumn is covered with heads of flowers which reach their musky, sweet-scented peak in October. In the long mild autumn of 2010 these flowers kept honeybees fed for weeks – a great reassurance since we had seen few earlier in the year.



Fig. 18 The sight of this *Alstroemeria* competing vigorously with clematis and roses fills us with admiration.





Fig. 19 Given a sheltered, sunny position, *Ageratina ligustrina* will be covered with flowers in October.

two woody plants to remind me of my visit and the people connected with it. The gardener pressed a bunch of *Cotoneaster* berries into my hand as we went round, and one of these has, in the course of many years, turned into a handsome specimen, trained as a standard. Ironically, in view of my interest in nomenclature, I have never tried to pin down its identity precisely. Nor am I absolutely certain of the identity of the hebe<sup>4</sup>, a cutting of which came home with me. As I returned my wellies to the boot of the car,



Fig. 20 Honestly, it is a true story,

The scent of those flowers reminds me of an unforgettable visit, made soon after he died, to the garden at Hambleton in Rutland of the former diplomat and garden designer John Codrington. He had described his garden as “not a normal civilised garden. It is a mad, wild jungle full of weeds, which I call wild flowers”<sup>3</sup>. In truth, among the naturally occurring flora was a collection of rare plants and his gardener endeavoured to identify this abundance for me. Unfortunately, I was so much of a beginner at the time that much of it went over my head. However, in the conservatory, the scent of tall plants of *Humea elegans*, described as a mixture of hops, banana and incense, was overwhelming and it stays in my olfactory memory still. I have never gone on to grow this plant, but I do have

in slamming the door I accidentally trapped some ‘cuttings’ of this white-flowered shrub growing beside the drive. On my return home, there they were, sticking out of the back. Not exactly the recommended treatment for cuttings, but several rooted in due course. I still have it growing in my front garden, and when I tell people the story of how I came by it, they tend to show signs of scepticism and remark “that was handy, then, them just getting caught in the boot like that”. Honestly, it is a true story (fig. 20), and just one of the many that entertain me as I go round the garden. 🍷

**Judy Harry**, a former HPS Chairman, believes that it is quite in order to talk to the plants in our gardens: a lot of them are ‘people’, after all, and, like people, they respond to polite kindness.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *Garden People: Valerie Finnis and the Golden Age of Gardening* by Ursula Buchan

<sup>4</sup> Most probably *Hebe salicifolia*