

# The learning curve

Val Bourne

Reading and gardening are my two great pleasures. At the moment I'm enjoying Philip Larkin's *Letters to Monica*, edited by Anthony Thwaite, and I thoroughly recommend it. His letters cover thirty years and, if you are a child of the 1950s, they remind you of a simpler life, pre-television and car. But Larkin's gloom seeps through on every page. How I wish I could have tapped him on the shoulder and explained the sheer joy of gardening and the day to day drip-drip of pleasure it brings. Probably a good thing for Larkin I never met him!

I have jollity in my genes and it shows in my face. However, a large part of my *joie de vivre* derives from my garden. When back in early January I noticed the first pinprick of yellow on one of my witch hazels my spirits soared and, three hours later, when one flower was fully out, I almost exploded with delight. There are many other milestones throughout the year, all greeted with the same euphoria – the first crocus complete with bumble bee; the magenta-pink, *lactiflora* peony (which I have never known the name of) in full spate; and the heather-pink feather of the first *miscanthus* awn just breaking free from its tightly scrolled stem.

Every season has its own character, and I try to capture it with my planting. May, for instance, is such a gentle month. Fresh foliage frames wispy violas, pincushion *astrantias* and delicate London Pride. I use all three in close proximity up a path. London Pride, or *Saxifraga x urbium*, so 1950s, deserves a place in everyone's garden. The rosettes of foliage may get a little battered over winter, but by May they are as sleek as a plump cat. The airy panicles of tiny flowers, held a foot above the foliage, are a froth of pale-

pink and white, almost bridal. Beth Chatto sells a fine plant labelled *S. x geum* Dixter form that arrived via Christopher Lloyd, and Bob Brown of Cotswold Garden Flowers has *S. x 'Miss Chambers'*, a plant he describes as 'classy'. I have both and they seem the same to me, despite the varying names, but both have impeccable pedigrees.

I was lucky enough to visit East Lambrook Manor fifteen years ago on a glorious May day. Andrew Norton had the garden then and there was an almost casual planting of white comfrey, aquilegias, pulmonarias and *astrantias*, all Margery

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Fig. 1 *Astrantia major* subsp. *involucrata* 'Shaggy'.

Fish specialities. They caught the softness of the season perfectly. If you can find *Astrantia major* subsp. *involucrata* ‘Shaggy’ (fig. 1), a cool, green-veined, white astrantia with very large starry flowers, and then find it a dappled-shade position on moist soil, it will delight you. Often thought to have been found in Margery Fish’s garden, it was not so: she writes in *Cottage Garden Flowers* about a large, shaggy, green and white astrantia growing in Gloucestershire gardens and records that she had been given a plant; it must have become ‘Shaggy’.

Imposters are many, but the Plant Heritage Collection holder Bob Taylor does have the real ‘Shaggy’. He is now based at Field House Nursery near Gotham in Nottinghamshire – with Val Woolley’s auriculas. I feel a trip coming on!

‘Shaggy’ takes time to settle: it will only produce really large flowers after being established for three to four years, so be patient. It is the top flower that is largest of all. Dappled shade is ideal for this and all dark astrantias. Use them among hybrid hellebores, as they follow on after the hellebores have faded. Pale-pink astrantias like ‘Buckland’ prefer more sun and they flower for many weeks. I am very fond of ‘Stonehouse Perpetual’, a subtle pink and green astrantia that flowers and flowers. Beth Chatto sells it and David Ward ( her propagator) kindly sent me a plant. It was discovered at Louisa Arbuthnott’s Stone House Cottage Nursery near Kidderminster. I mentioned her walled garden and tender rarities last time.

The addition of *Viola cornuta* (fig. 2), elegant, foot-high plants with very green crinkled foliage and airy flowers, adds more gentility. These ‘winged violets’ should never be confused with pansies. Their dainty, wispy flowers arrive in May and, if cut back hard, a second August flush will appear. Then all cornutas need to be cut back hard again by the first week in September. This spurs them on to produce a compact mat of foliage, allowing them to overwinter.

E. A. Bowles, the distinguished garden writer and wealthy gentleman-gardener, admired May greatly. He wrote ‘if a fairy godmother or a talking fish offered me three wishes... one would have to be to have the clock stopped on a fine morning towards the end of May.’ Every committed gardener will applaud his choice. His wish was granted: he died, one week short of his eighty-ninth birthday, in 1954 on a May day.

But time doesn’t stand still, and the garden moves to midsummer, and this is when so many plants with a wildflower persona come in pastel shades of blue and pink. Campanulas have a special place in my heart, and many of us grow *C. lactiflora* with its wide head of flowers. ‘Prichard’s Variety’ has a reputation for being the deepest-blue but perhaps the true plant has been lost. The RHS trial that’s just begun at Wisley may provide an answer to the enigma. ‘Loddon Anna’ is a cool pink raised on the banks of



Fig. 2 *Viola cornuta*.



Fig. 3 *Kniphofia* 'Prince Igor' with *Rudbeckia laciniata* 'Herbstsonne'.

The American landscape architect Lanning Roper (1912–1983) designed lots of country-house borders in the 1970s, including Broughton Castle, near Banbury, one of Simon Jenkins's top twenty properties. Roper rigorously segregated his colours. Yellow, blue and white was a favoured combination and this certainly works well in summer light. Introducing pink to this palette he considered a crime. The garden surrounding the moated castle still strictly adheres to his colour rules and few gardens have such a magical setting or do such good teas!

By late summer in my own garden, Spring Cottage, there's an explosion of yellow and orange provided by the tall poker, *Kniphofia* 'Prince Igor'. It erupts into the air with *Rudbeckia laciniata* 'Herbstsonne', both topping six feet (fig. 3). This non-invasive daisy has single petals that flag a little in August heat, but the lime-green cone with its snuff-brown collar make it one of my all-time favourites. Like so many daisies it endures the heat, wind and rain and this one does not need staking. Blackened heads continue into winter and are normally cut down in January. The plant at the poker's base is the cobalt-blue *Ceratostigma willmottianum* – the shrubby plumbago. That tiny touch of blue adds more vibrancy and spark to the sunshine riot going on overhead. It would be enough to cheer anybody up – even Philip Larkin. 🍷

the River Loddon at Twyford near Reading by Thomas Carlile. Their ability to repeat flower (if deadheaded or cut down) makes them invaluable.

Last year my affections strayed to a much stiffer-stemmed, Cadbury-foil-blue campanula with flowers attached to a main stem that reached at least four feet in height. It was *Campanula latiloba* 'Highcliffe Variety'. It's another selected by Prichard, whose Riverslea Nursery (once based at Chichester) was responsible for several gems including the hardy geranium 'Russell Prichard'. I saw 'Highcliffe Variety' popping up among summer-flowering shrubs and roses and it was superb. I'd seen it before but somehow the strong verticals looked right among the arching old-fashioned roses. According to Peter Lewis (writing in *Campanulas in the Garden*, published by the HPS) it will also rebloom if cut back.