

A fine supporting cast

Alex Pankhurst

This summer I finally gave up on a winter casualty, and went to a large and prestigious garden centre to buy a replacement. The place was a riot of roses, lilies, fuchsias, dahlias and osteospermums. Prima donnas, all shouting ‘Look at me!’ The effect was less than calming, and pointed up how much we gardeners rely on quieter plant personalities to provide a pleasing contrast to the flashy performers.

In my garden teucriums are particularly valued as support acts, and I grow nine of them – just counted up. They’re thought to be named after King Teucer, first king of Troy (no, me neither). Colloquially though, the family are known as germanders, and Wall Germander, *T. chamaedrys* (fig. 1), is probably the best known. It was also the first one I bought, thirty years ago. Planted in a south-facing, dust-dry bed skirting the house, that same plant now forms a dense drift of dark green, two metres across, which in July will hum with bees visiting the short, pink flower spikes. It usually gets sheared over in winter to keep it compact, but doesn’t seem to mind if I forget. Shrugging off drought and freezing winters, it will root readily from cuttings, but in all that time only a couple of seedlings have been thrown. Hardy, dependable and well-mannered, what more could you want in a plant. Or a friend for that matter.

Further round the house is a narrow bed between wall and path, where its cousin *T. pyrenaicum* (fig. 2) resides. I’ve never been to the Pyrenees, but apparently this plant’s natural habitat is scree and stony grassland, preferably on lime, and to above 2,200m. So you’d think being expected to grow at around sea level in North Essex would cause rebellion. Not a bit of it. An unassuming little person only 10cm high,



Fig. 1 *T. chamaedrys*



Fig. 2 *T. pyrenaicum*

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Fig. 3 *T. flavum*Fig. 4 *T. scorodonia* 'Crispum Marginatum'

the Pyrenean Germander clothes this unpromising space all year, evergreen rosettes topped in June with modest white, lipped flowers touched with mauve. Okay, so no visitor's ever going to stop and exclaim, 'I must have a cutting of that wonderful plant! What is it?' But then again it has no discernible faults, and quietly flourishes without any attention whatever. For an ageing gardener with a lot to do that has definite appeal.

Evergreen *T. flavum* (fig. 3), with gently serrated, shiny leaves, grows to about one metre high and wide. It's not the sort of plant you enthuse about, and certainly in earlier years I'd have dismissed it as irredeemably dull. Thing is though, it's useful – at the foot of a climber; as a fill-in plant between a bossy shrub and more showy perennials; or as a halfway point between border and a 'wild' area. It seems happy to grow in full sun, and also in that most inhospitable of places, dry shade, providing calm, unfussy greenness. But then in late June, oh dear, it flowers! Puts out rangy stalks with untidy, pale yellow

inflorescences that give the plant a scruffy air, in contrast to its previously polished neatness. It's as if a solid, reliable, undemanding companion has gone on a binge, and confided a disreputably troubled life. You just can't wait for it to sober up.

With desperately little rainfall and gravel soil, this garden's dry shade presents the sort of conditions plants must have nightmares about. And woodland plants generally either like a nice, damp, leafy soil, or disappear below ground when the tree canopy develops. The Woodland Germander, *T. scorodonia*, a sub-shrub, does neither, and amazingly still manages to flourish. I grow *T. s.* 'Crispum Marginatum' (fig. 4) in one of my most inhospitable areas, beneath a holly tree, and it never complains. The wavy, mid-green leaves look like suede, but at the edges exuberance breaks through into frills that would delight a can-can dancer. It does flower, but not so's you'd notice – a self-effacing green, they're hardly worth the name. But I'm just grateful to have something growing where precious little else would.

About ten years ago Mike Tristram, of Binsted Nursery in Sussex, found a greeny-

yellow form of the Woodland Germander, growing in Slindon sandpits near Binsted, and took a cutting, which he named *T. scorodonia* ‘Binsted Gold’ (fig. 5). (Even out walking a plantsman is always a plantsman). ‘Gold’ is flattering it rather, the adult plant is just a limier green than the type, but useful as a drift of interesting foliage between more floriferous plants. It seeds a bit, and about half of them come true – you can tell immediately as the first tiny leaves are bright yellow.

When I started gardening, Graham Thomas’s *Perennial Garden Plants* was the hardy-plant bible, and he mentions only one teucrium, *T. hircanicum* (fig. 6). Apparently introduced in 1763 from Iran, where has it been in the intervening centuries? I saw it for the first time on an HPS garden visit in 2000, snapped it up from the plant stall, and have never regretted the purchase. The thing does seed, admittedly. Quite a lot. But it’s easy to snip off the spikes as they go over, and plants that bloom in late July and August, whatever the weather, are owed a bit of tolerance. The flowers are narrow, self-supporting columns of maroon, decorating difficult places, and this one does cause people to exclaim, ‘What is that?’ Less so of late, for after two hundred and fifty years of obscurity, *T. hircanicum* has finally made it into one of the glossy plant catalogues. Horrors, it might even become fashionable.

One day two more cracking plants will surely be promoted to the general public that at the moment only specialist nurseries offer. Scutellarias are relations of the teucriums, both members of the *Salvia* tribe, with lipped flowers. An ineradicable blue one, name long since forgotten, infests a scrubby, shrubby area in my garden, rather putting me off the rest of the family. But a few years ago I paused at the sight of a small, unknown plant in an Easter car-boot sale. The amateur stall holder had grown it from commercial seed, he said, but couldn’t remember where he’d got that, or indeed the name. There are those who can’t resist stray animals. Me, I’m compelled to take home sad little



Fig. 5 *T. scorodonia* ‘Binsted Gold’, seedling inset



Fig. 6 *T. hircanicum*

Fig. 7 *Scutellaria orientalis*Fig. 8 *S. suffrutescens* 'Texas Rose'

plants with no labels, so this mysterious orphan was duly planted in the garden, on top of a two-foot retaining wall.

Oh boy, was that lucky. With leaves like a miniature oak, the plant grew fast, trailing down the wall, and in July it burst into yellow, snapdragon-like flowers, each developing a small brown blotch as it aged, a cascade of pure delight. What's more it proved hardy, although, to my surprise, deciduous. Just to establish the genus took a while, but eventually I narrowed it down to *Scutellaria orientalis* (fig. 7), which occurs most commonly in Turkey. Goodness knows how seed was offered commercially, since it's almost impossible to find any, although I garner just a few to send to the HPS

seed exchange every year. The original plant is about six years old now, and pleasure in growing it caused me to buy another scutellaria a couple of years later.

S. suffrutescens 'Texas Rose' (fig. 6) its label said, and the stiff, spiky little plant looked like an alpine. (Alpines, in Texas? And surely it wouldn't be hardy.) Well this Texan might not be rangy, but it has proved to be a tough customer, shrugging off

two vicious winters, and delighting me every July by covering itself with dark pink flowers. Absolutely no attention required or given. Doesn't seem to seed itself, but cuttings root readily, so I'm trying it in several places. And no wonder this plant has alpine characteristics – enquiry reveals that it's a native of North West Texas, where the land rises towards the Rockies and the climate is dry and windy. It's a little gem.

So now I'm on the lookout for other members of this underrated family. They and their teucrium cousins may not have the aura of celebrity about them, but give me a Good Doer over a Flash Harry any day. 🍷

Alex Pankhurst gardens in North Essex, and is the author of two books, with a new novel due out in January.