

# Self-seeders, love them or hate them?

Gill Regan

One sunny autumn afternoon I was showing a friend round the garden and we were admiring a large patch of *Cyclamen hederifolium* in full flower. I explained that my father had given me a few tubers when I first started gardening 35 years earlier, and over the years the cyclamen had seeded around, with no help from me, until there were little patches of pink and white all over the garden. I commented that in winter the same area has hundreds of snowdrops and aconites poking up between the cyclamen leaves, all from a few bulbs also from my father. As we continued our walk, I realised that many plants in the garden had started out in the same way, and suddenly I became aware of how much my garden depends on self-seeders.

It set me thinking about plants that seed around, and their position and role in the garden, and I decided that they fall into several groups.

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Fig. 1 *Centranthus ruber*

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Fig. 2 *Eryngium giganteum* (Miss Wilmott's Ghost)

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Fig. 3 My "Nectaroscordum forest".

## Thugs

These are plants that don't know their place in the community of plants that is my garden. *Centranthus ruber* (fig. 1) seedlings sprout out of the flint wall and look stunning, but below the wall, later in the year, seedlings appear by the thousand. I bought *Teucrium hircanicum* after reading its description in *Perennial Garden Plants* by Graham Stuart Thomas –



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Fig. 4 An unidentified aster



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Fig. 5 *Meconopsis cambrica*



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Fig. 6 *Geranium nodosum*

‘an unusual plant’ ... ‘For many weeks slender dense spikes of tiny dark lilac flowers decorate it’ I was very pleased with it at first, but horrified later to see hundreds of seedlings all to be weeded out, so the *teucrium* had to go. Some plants seed in the middle of others and are impossible to remove: for example, *Eryngium giganteum* (Miss Wilmott’s Ghost) in the middle of an agapanthus (fig. 2). I love the architectural flower spikes and would like to leave them all through the winter, but I have to cut them down as soon as the seeds start to be released or there will be an “*Eryngium* forest” the next year. The same is true of *Nectaroscordum siculum*; I can’t leave them to produce their wonderful conical seedheads – I already have a “*Nectaroscordum* forest” (fig. 3)!

Years ago at a Brownie sale I bought a small aster (fig. 4) – I don’t know the species. It produces snowy white flowers early in the autumn but it is a prodigious seeder. I don’t tidy the borders until the spring, so I have only myself to blame for the hundreds of seedlings.

Also falling into this group of thugs that would like to take over the garden are *Meconopsis cambrica* (fig. 5) *Pachyphragma macrophyllum*, *Geranium nodosum* (fig. 6), *Tellima grandiflora* (fig. 7), *Geranium x oxonianum* (fig. 8) and *G. endressii*.



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Fig. 7 *Tellima grandiflora*



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Fig. 8 *Geranium x oxonianum*

Fig. 9 *Pimpinella major* 'Rosea'

Fig. 10 Hellebores are a favourite of mine but some produce masses of seedlings at the base of the parent plant.

### Plants that are generally well behaved but need watching

These plants rarely produce huge numbers of seedlings, but they can still cause problems. Purple fennel is an example, because even small seedlings can be very difficult to remove as their carrot-like roots are very tenacious. The same is true for *Pimpinella major* 'Rosea' (fig. 9). Hellebores are a favourite of mine but some produce masses of seedlings at the base of the parent plant (fig. 10) and you end up with a muddle if you don't remove them while they are very small. *Dahlia scapigera* (fig. 11) is a *Dahlia merckii* look-alike, hardy with me, and each year it increases in size, so when I see an occasional seedling I have to check carefully to make sure there is room for the large plant that it will eventually turn into. A *Phacelia* species – *bolanderi* I think (fig. 12) – is brilliant, a low-growing plant that copes excellently with the dry summers we often get here in Kent. It flowers over a very long period and produces some seedlings – but again, if the seedling is in the wrong place remove it quickly, because its roots will be heading for Australia!

I very much like the architectural effect produced by *Onopordum acanthium* (fig. 13) but as the leaves are huge they can smother smaller plants. *Verbascum* seedlings pop up

Fig. 11 *Dahlia scapigera*Fig. 12 A *Phacelia* species – *bolanderi*?Fig. 13 *Onopordum acanthium*



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Fig. 14 *Verbascum* seedlings pop up and the grey woolly foliage of the young plants can be quite attractive.



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Fig. 15 *Scutellaria alpina*

and the grey woolly foliage of the young plants can be quite attractive but cause the same problem (fig. 14). Even small plants such as *Scutellaria alpina* (fig. 15) can smother their smaller neighbours in the same way.

### Well-behaved plants

These plants produce seedlings but not in huge numbers, they can easily be removed and they don't smother their neighbours. Here are some examples: *Eranthis hyemalis* (front cover), *Melittis melissophyllum* (fig. 16), *Lilium martagon* (fig. 17), *Corydalis malkensis* (fig. 18), and alliums such as *A. cristophii* (fig. 19), and *A. nigrum* (fig. 20).

### Valuable seedlings I'm delighted to see

I have grown *Trillium kurabayashii* (fig. 21) for many years. The clump slowly increased in size but I found no seedlings until I realised that any that appeared would be smothered by a neighbouring thug, so I kept the area around the clump clear and was very excited when my first self-sown seedlings appeared. *Jeffersonia dubia* (fig. 22), one of my favourite plants, first produced seedlings around its base after a cold winter. *Beesia deltophylla* (fig. 23), *Glaucium flavum* f. *fulvum* (fig. 24), *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*, *Coriaria terminalis* var. *xanthocarpa* (figs 25 & 26), and some trees such as *Koelreuteria paniculata* occasionally produce seedlings and I am always pleased to see them. I was delighted this year to see my first two seedlings of the giant Himalayan lily, *Cardiocrinum giganteum* (fig. 27).

### Plants I wish would self-seed

So far I have not had self-sown seedlings of *Lilium monadelphum* (fig. 28), *Trillium luteum* and *T. flexipes*, erythroniums and fritillaries. I would be delighted to see new little plants of any of them!



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Fig. 16 *Melittis melissophyllum*

Fig. 17 *Lilium martagon*

I have given a talk on this topic many times and it is always interesting to hear comments from the audience. I have no problems with *Allium sphaerocephalon* (fig. 29), but clearly it's a problem for some people. I've been trying to work out the reasons for this and I suspect there are many: I garden on heavy clay soil and alliums do well here only as long as they are planted in a well-drained area, but in a sandy soil it could well be a different matter. My parents gardened on acid sandy soil, and not only did early spring bulbs such as scillas and chionodoxas produce great drifts of blue, but *Fritillaria imperialis* also produced seedlings. Ground cover also has an effect, as I discovered when I left bare soil round my trillium patch.

Fig. 18 *Corydalis malkensis*Fig. 19 *Allium cristophii*Fig. 20 *Allium nigrum*Fig. 21 *Trillium kurabayashii*

### Why I love self-seeders

I have always been fascinated by plants, and my husband and I enjoy travelling all over the world to see them. Plants in their natural environments colonise every inch of ground by spreading and self-seeding, and there is very little bare soil (fig. 30). Over the years I've realised that I am happiest when plants in the garden look as though they are growing in the wild, and this can be achieved by allowing them to seed around.

When *The Wild Garden* by William Robinson was published in 1870, it described the fashion for 'placing numbers of tender plants in the open air in summer to produce showy masses of colour' and 'a gradual rooting out of all the old favourites in favour of this bedding system'. Robinson aimed to show how 'we may have more of the varied beauty of hardy flowers' 'by naturalising many beautiful plants of many regions of the earth' 'in almost every kind of garden'. By allowing plants to self-seed I am mimicking what happens in the wild and allowing them to naturalise. However, in the wild there is competition among the different species for nutrients, light and water, and eventually a balance is achieved,



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Fig. 22 *Jeffersonia dubia*



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Fig. 23 *Beesia deltophylla*



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Fig. 24 *Glaucium flavum* f. *fulvum*



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Figs 25 & 26 *Coriaria terminalis* var. *xanthocarpa*

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Fig. 27 *Cardiocrinum giganteum*

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Fig. 28 *Lilium monadelphum*

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Fig. 29 *Allium sphaerocephalon*

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Fig. 30 Plants in their natural environments colonise every inch of ground by spreading and self-seeding, and there is very little bare soil.

with a mixed community where no single species overruns the rest. Within a garden, with plants from all over the world, some of which are not very good competitors, we have an artificial situation which needs work to prevent some plants from taking over: strict control of self-seeders is essential. The end result is a labour-saving garden because there is no bare soil for weeds to colonise; the overall effect is romantic and naturalistic, and certainly pleases me. 🌿

**Gill Regan** is a scientist who's has been interested in plants all her life. A founder member of the Kent Group, Gill has served as secretary of the Ranunculaceae Group since its formation. The garden at Frith Old Farmhouse, Otterden, Kent, is open for the NGS on April 21st, May 5th and June 16th and also by appointment any time.