

# The thief in the night

Judy Harry

One of the principles of garden design is that we plant trees and shrubs to establish a framework of taller and, hopefully, permanent reference points. Into this framework we plant as many perennials and other plants as possible; and we make use of the shelter and shade provided by these obliging creatures which we very probably take more or less for granted. That is, until one morning, when we awake to find that there has been a thief in the night, of the sort that creeps up unexpectedly when our guard is down.

This happened in our garden in February 2012. Generally, the winter had been a dry and mild one, even by the standards of our proximity to the coast. Then wham! We awoke on the 11<sup>th</sup> to find the thermometer standing at  $-11^{\circ}\text{C}$  and learned that the Lincolnshire record for February low temperatures had been equalled that morning. There had indeed been an unwelcome, very cold, intruder (fig.1).

Within two weeks, the temperature had shot up again to  $18^{\circ}\text{C}$ , with continuing exceptionally dry weather increasing the likelihood of drought restrictions. It was all very confusing, and one tree and several shrubs thought so too, even if they took some time to show their distress. In other words, we hadn't grasped what had been stolen from us, until some of our taken-for-granted, permanent-framework plants started showing signs of extensive damage.

It was at the Autumn Gardens Day in Kent in September 2000 that I bought *Buddleja*



Fig. 1 An unwelcome, very cold, intruder...

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Fig. 2 The flowers of *Buddleja loricata* are worth a close look.

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Fig. 3 Leaving....a tattered brown-leaved wreck behind.

*loricata*. This is a native of quite high altitudes in Africa; whether or not I was aware of this I cannot remember, but I planted it in a spot where it would get little shelter from the Siberian cold wind that can occur here, but in a very free-draining soil. It established well and, with its spikes of honey-rich white flowers, each with a bright orange eye (fig. 2) and grey-green textured leaves, it became a firm favourite, providing a soft but substantial ‘stop’ at the end of a mixed border. It is easy to keep in shape, as it only requires a tidying after its early-summer flowers have faded; that is, until the night that the thief came, leaving, after a week or so, a tattered, brown-leaved wreck behind it (fig. 3).

It is hard not to fiddle with a plant that is looking hideous in a prominent position, but I resisted the temptation to start pruning until I could see just how deep the damage had gone. By May, some of the flower spikes were developing on live wood, amongst many dead branches, and by July, to my relief, new growth was shooting from the base. Removing the old top growth will of course leave this juvenile regrowth very exposed and it may need some protection to get it through the next winter. There’s nothing like almost losing what should be a permanent feature to make you take more care of it.

Every garden has its own ‘take’ on hardiness, and this is something we learn by experience. Many years ago I planted *Ribes speciosum* in the sort of sheltered situation recommended by ‘the books’. It very soon died. A very kind friend gave me a replacement, and I tried again, planting this one against a different, sheltering, west-facing wall. It was slow to establish, but at least it didn’t die, and it gradually grew tall enough to overtop the wall where it waved its unprotected branches about and flowered profusely in the teeth of the aforementioned



Fig. 4 It will have to go...



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Fig. 5 The Silver Privet in reality has pretty cream-margined leaves.



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Fig. 6 Pure white flowers on *Escallonia* 'Iveyi' are a valuable feature in July and August.

Siberian wind. But of course the February icy blast gave it a hefty swipe and all the top growth soon shrivelled and browned. By this time I was learning to ignore these signs of devastation and the ribes in due course made enough of a recovery to produce at least some flowers.

Another west-facing wall shelters a shrub with which I have a love-hate relationship. *Itea ilicifolia* is an interesting shrub of the non-colourful variety, as it has holly-like shiny green leaves and hanging tassels of pale creamy-green flowers in late summer. A study in green, unless it suffers from lack of moisture and/or low temperatures as it did in the spring of 2012. Then each leaf takes on a hideous brown cast and the persistent flower stems hang on like grim death presenting a mournful picture of untidiness. I am sure that in a damper, more equable climate, this shrub would make a fine feature. In my garden however, where conditions clearly do not suit it, it is a constant source of disappointment and irritation and it will have to go (fig. 4).

It was a very long time before I realised that one of my favourite trees had been affected by the low temperatures. *Ligustrum lucidum* is probably most often seen growing as a handsome shrub in the variegated form *L. l.* 'Excelsum Superbum'. But in the early 1990s I planted the plain green species with the clear intention of letting it reach tree-like proportions. By 2011, it had reached around eight metres or more tall, with a full head of lovely, glossy, evergreen leaves. One of the delights of



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Fig. 7 Defensive manoeuvres against *R.* 'Adélaïde d'Orléans



Fig. 8 Translucent yellow berries follow the white flowers of *Daphne mezereum* f. *alba* 'Bowles's Variety'.



Fig. 9 Cream flowers turn a rich pink as they age on *Weigela japonica* 'Dart's Colourdream'.

this giant privet is that it bears huge panicles of creamy flowers in autumn, and the remains of these stay on throughout the winter creating, in this case, a very attractive effect. The tree is in full view as I stand at the kitchen sink, so it was with a shock that I realised later on in the spring of 2012 that all was not well. Indeed, it looked as if the whole tree was dead: a very sorry sight. However, like the buddleja and the ribes it has shown a determination to recover, and by late June there were signs of new leaves on some of the apparently dead branches. Again, I shall give it time to show just how much of a recovery it can make.

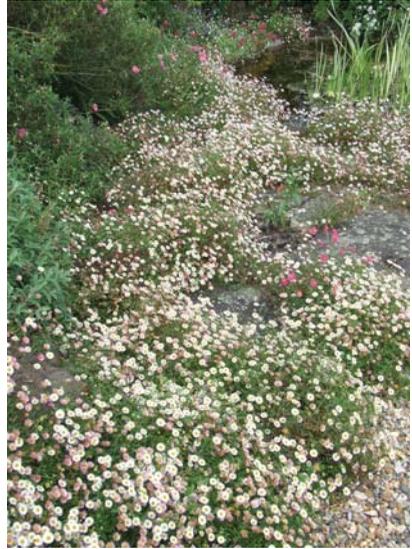
I am very fond of privets. They are not usually regarded as top-flight shrubs by the sophisticated gardener, and it was Rosemary Verey's use of the much-maligned golden privet, clipped and providing a support for early clematis, that really endeared her to me. And me to golden privet. I like the so-called silver privet *Ligustrum ovalifolium* 'Argenteum' even more, as its cream-margined leaves provide a good foil for surrounding plants (fig. 5). It can be left to grow tall, or be cut hard back each year; mine is rejuvenated in this way every few years. A comparatively rare golden-leaved privet is *L. 'Vicaryi'*, whose leaves of a subtle gold take on shades of bronze and purple in autumn, setting off the numerous black fruits to perfection. Both this and the silver privet are semi-evergreen with me, the loss of leaf being in direct proportion to the coldness of the winter. So, not surprisingly, the thief took them all, but without causing permanent damage.

Another slightly tender shrub I grow, on the south-facing house front, is *Escallonia* 'Iveyi'. This large evergreen bears wonderfully glossy dark leaves, and in late summer, big panicles of pure white flowers (fig. 6). August 2012 saw it

flowering defiantly, having made a wonderful recovery after the thief's visit which had killed, apparently at random, a branch here and a branch there. Very odd. A nearby bay tree suffered a similarly hit and miss attack, just as it was recovering from the intense cold of the winter of 2010–11.

I think it was this untimely cold night that dealt the final blow to a rose that I had been struggling to keep in good health for some years. I first saw the climbing Hybrid Tea *Rosa* 'Guinée' in a friend's garden and fell head over heels in love with the maroon, velvety, richly scented blooms. I planted one, along with what proved to be an optimistically large number of other more vigorous roses, on a rather short run of fence (and there were clematis in between.) Intervening years have seen me fight a War of the Roses, with defensive manoeuvres against over-enthusiastic advancing forces of the sempervirens rambler *R.* 'Adélaïde d'Orléans' (fig. 7). Having read something of the life of Madame Adélaïde<sup>1</sup> I can see that this rose has some of the character of its namesake. It is hard to restrain or even get rid of it, as it throws out miles of viciously thorny growths in all directions, and as a rearguard action produces numerous suckers. I decided it would have to go and I think I have at last won the battle. Simultaneously, I made a last-ditch attempt to re-invigorate 'Guinée', which for unknown reasons had never really produced much healthy growth; so I cut it hard back to one or two younger stems and gave it a feed. In April, I realised that these stems were as dead as dead can be. I shall miss having one or two of those sumptuously scented velvet flowers on the kitchen windowsill.

It was not all doom and despair, however, for the garden also has a good framework of



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Fig. 10 *Erigeron karvinskianus* doing what comes naturally at Serge Hill Gardens, visited on the Hertfordshire Summer Gardens Day.



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Fig. 11 A highlight of the garden in May is the late-flowering tulip 'Menton'.

<sup>1</sup> On the page of the Historic Roses Group: [www.historicroses.org.uk](http://www.historicroses.org.uk)



Fig. 12 *Eremurus* enjoying the dry conditions and increased light.



Fig. 13 Knocking at the bedroom window.

perfectly hardy shrubs and trees and they proved to be particularly welcome in a year of unpleasant discoveries. I have grown *Daphne mezereum* for some years, particularly a fine deep pink form (*D. m. var. rubra?*) which flowers very freely. I also grow a white-flowered form that has to withstand some of the summer weight of an adjacent *Clematis* ‘Alba Luxurians’. It manages to produce a decent number of its creamy little flowers and in due course wonderful translucent yellow berries (fig. 8). This was a favourite of that great Edwardian plantsman E. A. Bowles and mine is the one that is named after him, *D. m. f. alba* ‘Bowles’s Variety’.

Early summer also brings a newer addition to the garden into the limelight. I would have said that *Weigela* was not one of my favourite shrubs, but have been quite won over by the lovely display put on by *W. japonica* ‘Dart’s Colourdream’ (fig. 9).

Its two-tone flowering habit puts it into that interesting group that also contains favourite perennials *Erigeron karvinskianus* (fig. 10) and *Geranium x oxonianum* ‘Winscombe’, all of which have the admirable habit of enriching the colour of their flowers as they age. If I were a plant breeder, I think I would aim to instill this habit into as many plants as possible; the way in which plants and shrubs ‘go over’ is an attribute that perhaps has not attracted as much attention as it should. Anyone willing to have a go?

Notwithstanding my affection for *Buddleja loricata*, the classic

example of less-than-attractive dying flowers belongs in particular to the various forms of ‘the Butterfly Bush’, *B. davidii*, whose unfortunate habit is to hold on determinedly to perfectly formed spikes of dead brown flowers. Nevertheless, I am fond of the rather more delicate-looking *B. d.* Nanho Blue, whose silvery, narrow leaves set off the blue flowers very nicely. However this variety is prone to reversion and, at the time of writing, a glance out of the window has confirmed that the flowers on mine are looking much more purple than I remember from previous years. Hey ho. This genus of shrubs also taught me a valuable lesson: beware plant snobbery. I had a perfectly good shrub of the interesting hybrid *B. x weyeriana*. This offspring of *B. globosa* and *B. davidii* not surprisingly carries orangey-yellow ball-shaped flowerheads arranged in spikes. Then I heard of the infinitely more subtle and classy variety, *B. x w.* ‘Moonlight’, and felt that urge so familiar to us Hardy Planters – ‘I must have it’. It was duly planted in place of the ordinary form, and proved to be not so much subtle as (frankly) dingy. At least it is hardy, and still occupies its place, being cut back hard every spring by me, rather than by low temperatures.

As the year progressed, along with these reliable hardy shrubs was a reassuringly good selection of spring and early-summer plants which took the edge off any despondency that I might have been feeling. For many years, a particularly fine late-flowering *Tulipa* ‘Menton’ has persisted in a well-baked raised bed (fig. 11). Each spring I hold my breath, waiting to see if it will do it again, and so far I have not been disappointed. The large flowers come in a wonderful blend of pale and



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Fig. 14 Brown bracts wrap up the flowers of *Asphodelus albus*.



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Fig. 15 Rich brown velvet blooms on the Tall Bearded *Iris* ‘Dutch Chocolate’ x ‘Witch of Endor’.



Fig. 16 Can withstand both chimney sweeps and....



Fig. 17 The first ones to flower in a bed of mixed Dutch Iris

salmon pink with a faint apricot overlay: quite stunning.

Equally subtle in flower colour is an *Eremurus* (a hybrid I think, or possibly straight *E. robustus*) which has done moderately well since I acquired it on the 2005 East Yorkshire Summer Gardens Day. The warm and dry conditions before and after the icy blast must have suited it, for it flowered really well in 2012 and will continue to do so I hope (fig. 12). Some drastic reshaping of the border where it grows has removed a nearby *Sambucus nigra* f. *porphyrophylla* 'Eva' (also known as *S. n.* f. *p.* 'Black Lace') and let in a lot more light. I love this elder with its lacinate, shiny black leaves, but I had put it in quite the wrong spot. Any attempts to keep it within bounds were laughed off as it grew enthusiastically to the point where it was knocking at the bedroom window above (fig.13). It had to go, and the War of the Elder followed shortly after the Wars of the Roses.

At the end of this border is a group of brown-leaved or -flowered plants which give the early summer garden a real buzz. The foliage of *Euphorbia dulcis* 'Chameleon' persists by self-seeding next to *Asphodelus albus*, whose spikes of white starry flowers are encased in dark brown bracts (fig.14). On opening, each petal is found to have a smart brown stripe running down it. These were originally raised from seed eleven years ago. Nearby is a patch of a much-loved brown Tall Bearded Iris which is a 'Dutch Chocolate' x 'Witch of Endor' cross (fig. 15). It thrives in spite of growing near where the 'resident' chimney sweep stands to get access to a little door in the wall, from which there always escapes a certain amount of totally unweathered, powdery soot. These plants are given structure by nearby brown-leaved shrubs *Berberis thunbergii* f. *atropurpurea* 'Helmound Pillar' and *Physocarpus opulifolius* 'Diabolo', both of which can withstand both chimney sweeps and

unexpected life-robbing frost events (fig.16).

Attending the Annual Lecture Day and AGM is always most enjoyable, and at the 2012 meeting in Sheffield we heard Anna Pavord lecture. She talked on the subject of bulbs, and notes were made of things to plant in the autumn. Also, she talked about the many virtues of both Dutch and English iris. I have been growing several short rows of the former for some years for cut flowers, and following her recommendation, will be moving some into mixed borders (fig.17). I can hardly wait to see how they will do, and will in any case replant a proportion of them in a fresh position for cutting.



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Fig. 18 Never having grown *Tanacetum coccineum* before, I have become quite a fan.

Some newcomers to the garden were planted as much for cutting as for their contribution to the mixed border. Pyrethrum (*Tanacetum coccineum*) in mixed shades of pink produced a handsome crop of flowers for the first time, obviously enjoying the weather conditions that had been so hazardous for other things (fig.18). Out of favour for many years because of their tendency to virus disease, they may come back into fashion if the reaction of various friends to mine are anything to go by.

And so the process of learning by experience goes on. Has the experience of that unexpected cold, cold night put me off some of the less hardy subjects? Not really, and I will be hoping that new-to-me varieties of blackcurrant-scented salvias, the pink *S.* 'Dyson's Joy' and rich scarlet *S.* 'Royal Bumble', will prove to be as hardy as others I have had out in the garden for some years. Just to make sure, I will of course follow the belt and braces procedure of taking cuttings from them. I will also hope that the very healthy plants



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Fig. 19 This low-growing Californian, *Phacelia bolanderi*, will be put to the test this winter.



Fig. 20 'Elixir of the Sun'

of *Phacelia bolanderi* (fig. 19) will survive into another year. They were raised from seed from the 2012 Seed Distribution, and have made spreading border-front plants carrying quantities of soft blue flowers among the grape-like leaves. Native to California, this phaecelia was named in the 1870s by Henry Nicholas Bolander who was California Superintendent of Public Instruction. This, I feel, gives it some gravitas and, I hope, a strong will to live.

I have also raised young plants of *Heimia salicifolia* from the Seed Distribution. A yellow-flowered shrub of the Loosestrife family, it is a native of Southern and Central America, so it is not surprising that the seedlings grew only very slowly during the depressingly cool summer months. It would be interesting to get it to a reasonable size, if only to have the slightly daring experience of growing a plant that is welcomed, particularly in southern North America, for providing a 'legal high'<sup>2</sup>. One of its common names is Elixir of the Sun (fig. 20) and we all could do with some of that, if only to console us when unpredictable cold-weather events catch us out. 🌱

**Judy Harry**, a former chairman of the society, now has the enjoyable task of co-ordinating the HPS Horticultural Advisory Service, and would welcome your queries.

<sup>2</sup> For more see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heimia\\_salicifolia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heimia_salicifolia) and *The Hardy Plant* Vol 32, No 2 Autumn 2011