

President's perspective – plants, people and places

Roy Lancaster

Inevitably, for many of us, 2012 will be remembered for one thing – rain, wet, floods even, and the depressingly familiar sight of threatening skies accompanied by the forecasters' promises of more if not worse to come. In letters to friends I wrote jokingly of my plans to build an ark, just in case, which led me to consider which plants, if it came to it, I would take on board for a voyage to a better, preferably drier, place. Of course, such an idea would be impractical, even if the energy and means were available, but it did briefly focus my mind on which of my plants I consider the most important.

Having started my list with the one-offs, the rarities, followed by those I have collected or selected myself over the years, and those given me by friends past and present, not forgetting those which have tickled my fancy, provoked my curiosity or, like the native helleborine orchids in the hedge bottom, appeared unaided and unannounced, I eventually had to concede that most if not all my plants are special, and are in my garden for a very good reason. An example is *Sarcococca hookeriana* 'Winter Gem' (figs 1a and b) a plant given to me in January by its raiser Peter Moore, a former propagator at Hillier Nurseries who now works part time at Longstock Park Nursery near Stockbridge in Hampshire.

A deliberate cross between two forms of *S. hookeriana*, ssp. *digyna* 'Purple Stem' and ssp. *humilis*, it combines the low, dense, compact habit and broader glossy green foliage of the latter with the dark, dusky stems of the former. From both parents it has inherited a creeping rootstock which enables it to form a substantial patch in time. Best of all is its free-flowering



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Figs 1a and b Peter Moore with *Sarcococca hookeriana* 'Winter Gem'

nature, the axillary clusters of white-stamened flowers crowding the shoots in late winter, filling the air all round with a powerful, sweet fragrance. Like most of its clan, ‘Winter Gem’ enjoys most a moist but well-drained soil, acidic or alkaline, and thrives best in light shade. For those with small, especially town gardens, with limited soil space, ‘Winter Gem’ makes an excellent subject for container culture, potting on to a larger container when necessary. It also lends itself to propagation from suckers when required.

A long-weekend visit to North Wales at the beginning of March allowed me a visit to Bodnant Gardens (fig. 2), where much new planting is being carried out by the Head Gardener, Troy Scott-Smith, and his team, encouraged and supported by the Hon. Michael Maclaren. A highlight is the new Puddle Garden which celebrates three generations of the Puddle family, all former Head Gardeners at Bodnant, and it includes plants raised or associated with their tenures such as the well known *Viburnum x bodnantense* ‘Dawn’. Nearby, in a newly restored border, an impressive group of

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Fig. 2 Bodnant Gardens

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Fig. 3 *Bergenia* ‘Eric Smith’

Bergenia ‘Eric Smith’ (fig. 3) caught my eye with its dark red-purple winter foliage; it was raised by and named for the former HPS member and master plantsman who died in 1986.

On the retaining wall of a terrace below the house, I once again admired a particularly free-flowering male form of the Chinese evergreen currant *Ribes laurifolium* (fig. 4) which, in the cool, dappled shade of woodlands in Yunnan and Sichuan can be found hugging the damp, mossy stems of trees or rock faces. The female forms of this charming late-winter-blooming shrub are less striking in their pale green, smaller flowers and racemes. A plant of this species planted against a shady wall of the late Amy Doncaster’s house in Hampshire reached, with some support, a height of around 5m over many years.

Another wall plant demanded my attention in early April when a plant of *Clematis armandii* (fig. 5), from seed collected in Hubei, China by Colin Crosbie, Curator at RHS Wisley, flowered with us for the first time. It is trained up a drainpipe and, from a height of 4m, a long, loose stem wreathed with fragrant, pure white blooms of excellent quality dangled conveniently outside a kitchen window, providing the perfect frame when viewed from within. Having just returned from China myself, there could not have been a better reminder of the year's highlight.



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Fig. 4 *Ribes laurifolium*

A week in China's Sichuan province with friends Mikinori Ogisu, John Massey and Carla Teune was my tenth visit to what the English plant hunter E. H. Wilson regarded as the 'Mother of Gardens'. Although brief, a rather concentrated and selective itinerary allowed us to see a wide variety of woody and herbaceous plants, some in flower, many not. *Clematis armandii* was everywhere in woodland and thicket, its flowers variable in quality but impressive enough when viewed en masse from a passing vehicle. If I could choose but one day to remember in that memorable week it would be our visit to Baoxing, formerly Muping, in the mountains of the west, where in 1869 the great French missionary naturalist Armand David (of *Clematis armandii*) (fig. 6) spent several months at the catholic seminary, now referred to by the Chinese and the hordes of tourists as Father David's Church.



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Fig. 5 *Clematis armandii* collected by Colin Crosbie

Many of David's discoveries in that relatively brief stay proved new to science, most famously the panda and the Dove tree (*Davidia involucrata*), but the plant which first attracted our attention on that warm sunny April morning was a most beautiful primrose *Primula moupinensis* (fig. 7) whose pale pink flowers, each with a white central zone and an orange-yellow throat, nestled in a rosette of sharply toothed leaves powdered with a pale, mealy farina. In places these rosettes formed patches on shady banks above the trail, sometimes in bamboo thickets, and we found ourselves stopping regularly to take yet more photographs.

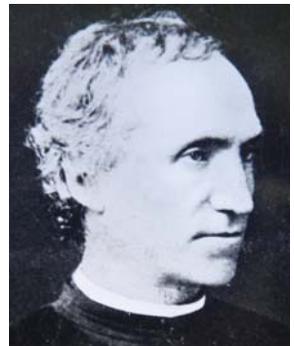


Fig. 6 Jean Pierre Armand David (1826–1900)

Fig. 7 *Primula moupinensis*

Not far away on a steep hillside we came across *Adonis davidii* (fig. 8), a low, tufted perennial with bright green, finely divided and ferny foliage above which saucer-shaped white flowers, tinted lilac or bluish on the outside, appeared to float. It was scattered for some distance, accompanied in some places by the pink-flowered *Oxalis griffithii* (fig. 9) and, in one damp, shady depression, the earlier-flowering, white-flowered *Eranthis albiflora*, then in seed. Several times we found the curious *Fritillaria davidii* (fig. 10), its short, broad, evergreen, fleshy leaves growing on damp mossy banks. This rare, dwarf species is characterised by the clusters of tiny dark bulbils clinging like bugs to the mother bulb. Had our visit occurred a few weeks later we might have been lucky enough to have seen the half-nodding, bell-shaped flowers which are yellow with a purplish mottling or chequering in their lower half.

Having spent some time combing the area in rather warm conditions we rested a while to eat our packed lunches before switching our attention to a series of long,

Fig. 8 *Adonis davidii*Fig. 9 *Oxalis griffithii*

shallow, moist depressions where scattered groves of *Magnolia officinalis* and *Cunninghamia lanceolata* had been planted above a natural ground cover of shuttlecock fern, *Matteuccia orientalis*. The previous year's fern fronds still remained, though crumpled and brown. As we made our way down from the heights we became aware of a plant forming scattered clumps and some whole colonies which on closer inspection proved to be *Helleborus thibetanus* (figs 11a and b). The deeply divided, sharply toothed leaves provided the perfect foil for the nodding to inclined bell-to-bowl-shaped, white or pale pink-tinted flowers. Mikinori and John had previously seen these hellebores in March, when the flowers were of a decidedly pink colour, though Miki confirmed that both pink and white individuals occurred naturally.

It was Mikinori, with help from Chinese colleagues, who rediscovered these populations in 1989 by following clues left behind by Father David who was the first European to discover them, recording in his diary for 15th March 1869 'a hellebore with white flowers that grows abundantly in large open patches towards the centre of the northern slopes of the mountains'. Sadly, this species has suffered serious depredations in some locations to satisfy horticultural demand in the west, as well as from its traditional use in native medicine. Currently, *H. thibetanus* is freely available in the nursery trade from home-grown stock which has in turn, hopefully, lessened the pressure on native populations.

As I had long wished to see and photograph this hellebore in the wild, the hour we spent with them that day will live long in my memory, especially when, as I sat at one point on a fallen tree admiring their myriad blooms, there came suddenly, loud and clear



Fig. 10 *Fritillaria davidii*

from a thicket nearby, the song of a nightingale. It was one of the few birds we had heard, let alone seen, that week, and it signalled the end of a perfect day.

I was reminded of China again when visiting the Harrogate Spring Show at the end of April. I was examining the casket of delights regularly staged by Edrom Nurseries and spotted *Anemone prattii* (fig. 12) for the first time. It resembles a slightly more

robust version of our native wood anemone, *A. nemorosa*, and when I planted it in a shady border in my garden it continued to produce white, look-you-in-the-eye flowers over several weeks. Its name commemorates the English naturalist Antwerp E. Pratt who from 1887–1890 travelled in the upper Yangtze area, for part of this time with his wife and family in tow.

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Figs 11a and b *Helleborus thibetanus* above Father David's church, Baoxing

In early June I was invited to visit the private garden of Barry Clarke, then propagator now Botany and Plant Records Officer at the Sir Harold Hillier gardens. His garden in the Test Valley village of Houghton, near Stockbridge, is typically that of a plantsman with a fascinating collection of plants, especially perennials. Barry is known for his National Collection of *Rubus*, for exhibits of which in 2007 and 2009 he was awarded gold medals at the RHS Hampton Court Flower Show. Naturally we spent some considerable time examining his brambles, including *R. splendidissimus*, which I once found growing in a shady stream gully in East Nepal, and *Rubus lineatus* ssp. *vietnamensis* (fig. 13), both decidedly of ornamental merit with beautifully veined, divided leaves with a silvery, silky under-surface. Neither, however, is reliably hardy outside in Britain without winter protection. Among the many other plants enjoying life in Barry's garden, I was impressed with a fine clump of the Chinese *Arisaema ciliatum* (fig. 14) and the neat, erect, dark purple almost black-flowered *Roscoea scillifolia* f. *atropurpurea* (fig. 15), a division of which he generously gave me.

Another interesting perennial I now grow is *Impatiens pseudoviola* 'Alba', a white version of a typically lilac-flowered species native to the mountains of Kenya and Tanzania. It was given to me by John Grimshaw, who was growing it in several moist, shady places in his garden at Colesbourne in Gloucestershire. It forms a low mound of fleshy stems with small leaves and a generous sprinkling of small, pretty flowers, the two lower segments of which bear a narrow, vertical, lilac stripe. With their long, slenderly curving and lilac-tinted spur and their elegant poise, they remind me of tiny moths or butterflies hovering above the foliage. It is not winter hardy but can be overwintered in a greenhouse, so long



Fig. 12 *Anemone prattii*



Fig. 13 *Rubus lineatus* ssp. *vietnamensis*



Fig. 14 *Arisaema ciliatum*



Fig. 15 *Roscoea scillifolia* f. *atropurpurea*



Fig. 16 *Primula florindae*

as the temperature does not sink much below 5°C. Easily grown from seed or by cuttings, it makes an excellent container or hanging basket plant and the perfect gift for a keen gardener. At the time of writing, on a cold, damp January day, I have in my greenhouse two hanging baskets filled with this little poppet of a plant in full flower.

On a very wet day in July I found myself visiting the gardens at Forde Abbey in Somerset. Not surprisingly, given the weather, the Bog Garden was in peak condition with lush drifts of primulas, *Iris* and *Rodgersia* in particular looking magnificent. One primula, *P. florindae* (fig. 16), was outstanding; each erect, slender stem crowned with a sumptuous head of drooping yellow blooms reminding me of the story that its discoverer, Frank Kingdon-Ward, named it for his first wife, the tall blonde Florinda. As in most colonies of this easy to grow species, there were self-sown seedlings with flowers of a reddish hue, which those romantics among us might interpret as a damsel blushing at the very thought.

My annual visit in October to the Courson Flower Show proved, as ever, an excellent excuse to purchase yet more new plants, two of which, the ginger lilies *Hedychium rubrum* (fig. 17) and Himalayan *H. gracile* (fig. 18), were in flower and irresistible. At a glance, the former has a look of *H. greenii* with its purple-backed foliage and heads of fiery red flowers, differing, however, in its larger, denser spikes, the flowers with red bracts. In cultivation, here certainly, *H. greenii* flowers are sterile and it reproduces itself viviparously from plantlets formed on the flower spike, whereas those of *H. rubrum* produce fertile seed and no plantlets. Native to Assam, *H.*

rubrum is not winter hardy, requiring protection against frost. I am growing both this and the longer, more slender-spiked *H. gracile* in containers under glass, with a view to displaying them outside in summer as gap fillers in my borders. I might also try the slender-stemmed *H. gracile* in the ground in a sheltered place where its spidery white flowers with contrasting red filaments are sure to attract attention.

As in 2011, my *Cobaea pringlei* continued to open flowers into early December before the cold shut it down, and on Christmas Day my old, 3m tall specimen of *Daphne bholua* ‘Darjeeling’ still dominated the rear garden with its flowers and its fragrance, having started to bloom in October. At Christmas too, I still had *Grevillea victoriae* in flower with more to come and *Mahonia russellii* into its second display, just beneath our bedroom window. With most plants closed down for the winter period I can take solace and gain inspiration from the pots full of seedling *Gladiolus cardinalis* and *G. flanaganii* and the recently potted seedlings of *Puya mirabilis*, all from my own seed, which will provide me with enough gifts to thank so many gardening friends and strangers alike as I travel around the country this year.

At the end of a year it is the promises of the new that help sustain us, and when I read of the herculean efforts of the HPS Seed team and note the equally impressive achievements of all those who help maintain and further the aims and work of this very special Society I find myself challenging the future: bring it on! 🌱



Fig. 17 *Hedychium rubrum*



Fig. 18 *Hedychium gracile*