

# President's perspective

**Roy Lancaster**

Without doubt, the highlight of 2013 was a ten-day holiday in Transylvania, Romania in early June. My wife Sue and I joined with three friends, two committed gardeners and one a professional. We stayed in the Saxon village of Richis in a traditional house, well looked after by a local lady who provided us with all our needs including packed lunches to eat in the meadows and woods where we spent most of our time searching for the flowers, birds and butterflies for which Transylvania is justly famous. Those who have visited this region will appreciate our falling in love with the other-worldly way of life (fig. 1) which found us taking endless photos of villages quietly settled in green valleys, sentinel storks by their nests on tall roofs, everywhere horse-drawn carts, fortified churches, and villagers in the meadows, sometimes 5 to 10 abreast, cutting the grass by scythe.



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Fig. 1 Transylvania – bringing in the hay

It was the meadows that provided most of our flowers (fig. 2) and butterflies, and we timed our visit well, arriving just as scything was getting under way in some areas. As for the flowers, we saw lots of species familiar from English grassland and marginal land such as *Hypericum perforatum*, *Galium verum*, *Sedum telephium*, *Rhinanthus minor* and *Centaurea scabiosa*, but it was the wealth of perennials more familiar to us from our gardens which most attracted our attention and our cameras. I'll take just two genera, *Campanula* and *Salvia*, as examples. Our searching in meadows and woodlands revealed seven bellflowers – *CC. rapunculoides*, *persicifolia*, *patula*, *glomerata*, *sibirica*, *trachelium* and *cervicaria* – and seven salvias: *SS. verticillata*, *nemorosa*, *austriaca*, *pratensis*, *glutinosa*, *transsylvanica* and *nutans*, the last a speciality there, with branching stems carrying terminal clusters of nodding, violet-blue flowers. Elsewhere we saw *SS. verticillata* and *nemorosa* forming colourful drifts on roadsides such as the main highway from the city of Sibiu to Sighisoara, best known as Vlad the Impaler's (alias Dracula's) birthplace.

Other roadside perennials included *Lavatera thuringiaca* (fig. 3), a wild parent (with *L. olbia*) of the popular garden hybrid *L. x clementii* and its selections of which 'Barnsley' and 'Rosea' are the best known. *Thalictrum lucidum* and that bold milkweed *Asclepias syriaca* also favoured roadside banks and ditches, the latter forming in places extensive colonies. One of Britain's rarest natives, the woolly woundwort, *Stachys germanica* (fig. 4), is found only in Oxfordshire whereas in

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Fig. 2 We found most of our flowers in the meadows – here *Dianthus carthusianorum*, *Galium verum* & *Erigeron annuus*

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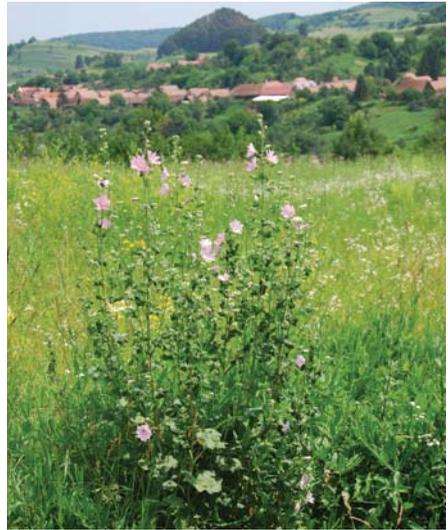


Fig. 3 *Lavatera thuringiaca*, a wild parent of several popular garden hybrids

Transylvania it was common on roadsides and dry, especially calcareous, banks. It is occasionally grown in gardens here where its erect clumps of grey, woolly stems and foliage, and long spikes of densely whorled, purplish-pink, two-lipped flowers are a real joy.

Of the meadow specials my particular favourites were the deep blue *Gentiana cruciata*, the rich-yellow-daisied *Inula ensifolia*, *Clematis integrifolia*, *Anthericum ramosum* and **the** most wonderful grass, *Chrysopogon gryllus* (fig. 5), whose pendant, golden spikelets were carried in glistening panicles on 1.2m tall stems above leafy clumps. Why, I asked my colleagues, isn't this in cultivation at home?

As a change from meadows we decided to head for the Carpathian Mountains near Brasov where, on a gloriously sunny day, with a blue sky and all the trimmings, we meandered through subalpine pastures rich in flowers and butterflies. *Digitalis grandiflora*, *Nepeta nuda* and *Dianthus carthusianorum* were at their peak but the best was yet to come. Descending into the valley, we took a stroll through the spectacular limestone gorge at Zarnesti where more gems awaited us in the form of *Campanula carpatica* and the unbelievably dainty *Dianthus spiculifolius* whose white, feathery flowers, above mats of narrow leaves on high rock ledges fooled me at first into thinking they were those of a cotton grass. But we were not yet done. While I was dutifully slicing cucumbers for our picnic salad, the others wandered off to look for butterflies. I heard someone call excitedly but I delayed investigating until it was



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Fig. 4 A rare British native, *Stachys germanica* was common on Transylvanian roadsides

Fig. 5 *Chrysopogon gryllus* – why isn't it grown widely in the UK?

too late. They had seen a beautiful Camberwell Beauty on a rock and, though I was pleased to see the photographs they had taken, I was mad with myself and the cucumbers for missing it.

The most exciting plants are often those we receive as unexpected gifts and I was the lucky recipient of one such in early April last year when attending the Cornwall Garden Society's Spring Show held at Boconnoc, near Lostwithiel. I had been invited to help with the judging of the competitive classes and the following morning to open the show. It was a beautiful day and the showground was rapidly filling with visitors intent on enjoying themselves. Having fulfilled my duties and about to join the crowd, I was presented by the Chairman with a plant in a pot. No ordinary plant this. It consisted of a single, slender, green, purple-flushed stem to 1m bearing at 8–10cm intervals whorls of narrow, grass-like leaves coiled at the tips. In the leaf axils were nodding clusters of tubular cinnabar-red flowers with six, tiny, green teeth surrounding the mouth. The label told me it was *Polygonatum kingianum* (fig. 6), a remarkable Solomon's Seal from north Vietnam, rare in cultivation and probably tender. Given its origin, I placed it in my cool greenhouse where it continued to flower for several weeks while its stem reached for the heights, attaining 3m by the end of the summer. I checked it again in January this year and it remains green, both stem and leaves.

Another gift, this time from a Belgian visitor to my garden, flowered for the first time in April. This was *Rohdea jinshanensis* (fig. 7), another Chinese perennial,

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Fig. 6 *Polygonatum kingianum*, a remarkable Vietnamese Solomon's Seal, in Roy's cool greenhouse

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Fig. 7 *Rohdea jinshanensis*



Fig. 8 Military Orchid in France – a rare species in England

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Fig. 9 Sweet-smelling *Polygonatum odoratum*

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differing from the more commonly grown *Rohdea japonica* in its long, leathery, strap-shaped leaves. The curious short spikes of greenish-yellow flowers appeared just proud of the ground at the base of the leaves and continued into May.

How often do you catch sight of something from a passing car and then agonise as to whether you should have stopped. I have known many such experiences in my life and it almost happened again one morning in May when my wife and I were in France heading from Malesherbes to Milly-la-Forêt on our way to the Courson Flower Show. Sue was driving when she spotted what she thought might be an orchid on the grassy roadside verge. We decided to stop and investigate and we were so glad we did. We ended up finding not one but several populations of Military Orchid (*Orchis militaris*) (fig. 8) a rare species in England. With them grew scattered spikes of Butterfly Orchid (*Platanthera chlorantha*) and a single, stout spike of Purple Limodore (*Limodorum abortivum*), a leafless saprophytic orchid looking for all the world like the emerging shoot of a purple asparagus. It can reach as much as 80cm tall and has a spike of violet-coloured flowers. Accompanying them were colonies of sweet-smelling *Polygonatum odoratum* (fig. 9), blue-flowered *Ajuga genevensis*, Wood Violets (*Viola riviniana*) and *Euphorbia cyparissias*. On the fringes of the wood nearby a St. Lucie cherry, *Prunus mahaleb*, was in white flower, its branches entwined with a fragrant cream-flowered honeysuckle (*Lonicera caprifolium*). What more could we have asked for?

In early May I had an all too brief but enjoyable visit to Sue and David Ward's garden which is just a few minutes drive from our own. It had been raining but, as always, her plants were impeccable and well placed. I was pleased to see she had *Lamium orvala* and its white form 'Alba', both of which are long-time favourites of mine, while another favourite, *Epimedium davidii*, was looking in fine form with its characteristic dark stems and rich-yellow-spurred, pendant flowers.

I cannot mention Hampshire without telling you about a special visit I paid to the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens on 9<sup>th</sup> July for the official opening by HRH The Duchess of Cornwall of the newly designed and planted Centenary Borders. This notable feature was first created to celebrate the Hillier Nurseries centenary in 1964 and originally contained many flowering shrubs backed by a large selection of hollies, box, yew, conifers and other evergreens. Over the years, its content changed several times, shrubs, roses and herbaceous perennials in various combinations providing colour and interest with varied success. However all this changed in 2010 following a decision to empty the borders and start anew. The result is impressive (fig. 10). According to David Jewell, Head of Collections, who with Head Gardener Fran Clifton headed the planting team of staff and volunteers, the new parallel borders, some 250m long on an east-west axis with access points at intervals, were planted with approximately 800 varieties of perennials plus 8000 bulbs as well as small trees and shrubs. An additional 20,000 bulbs, many of them alliums, were added last autumn to increase and extend the spring displays. Statistics apart, this is a major development in perennial plantings given the range of plants, species and cultivars, on display.

© Hillier Gardens



Fig. 10 The new 250m-long parallel borders at the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens



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Fig. 11 *Kniphofia* 'Erecta'

Fig. 12 *Sedum* 'Red Cauli'

On a visit in early September I found the borders in great form with *Kniphofia* 'Erecta' (fig. 11), *Sedum* 'Red Cauli' (fig. 12), and *K. rooperi*, *Phlox paniculata* 'Mount Fuji' (fig. 13), *Aster umbellatus* and one of my favourite grasses, *Miscanthus nepalensis*, at their best. As a showcase for perennials with associated climbers (on pyramids) and both flowering and foliage shrubs, the Centenary Borders are now one of this garden's biggest attractions and they can only get better.

As 2013 drew to a close some gardeners might be excused for wanting to see the back of it, especially those living in areas affected by floods, to whom my heart goes out. Strong, gusty overnight winds before Christmas trashed the crown of my rarest tree, *Nothaphoebe cavaleriei*, which at 12m was a British and Irish Champion. I drew back our bedroom curtains the following morning to see its broken branches scattered around the garden. Closer inspection revealed that the top portion of the tree, miraculously, was intact. But the most re-assuring sight was a young root sucker of 1m directly beneath the tree waiting for its moment to shine. Its presence reinforced in my mind the gardener's eternal belief – you lose one and gain another, and that I believe should be a comfort to us all as 2014 unfolds. 🌱



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Fig. 13 *Phlox paniculata* 'Mount Fuji'