



Fig. 1 One of my favourite but incriminating dahlias.

## Guilt in the Garden

**Gill Heavens**  
comes clean about  
breaking some  
horticultural rules.

They say that confession is good for the soul. Well by the end of this article I am hoping my soul will be cleansed and in tiptop condition again. The list of my misdemeanours is extensive, and I suppose as a professional gardener I should know better. Some of my sins are moral, some are horticultural. In my defence, and in an attempt to excuse my slovenly behaviour, day to day reality is a million miles away from the contents of the shiny gardening books that line my shelves and form piles at my feet. I love these books as much as the next person, but in the real world there are factors that prohibit following the rules and regulations to the letter – limited time is a large factor, inclination another.

If I were to be psychologically profiled I would be classified as ‘the

type of person who is incapable of following a recipe’. This is not through culinary superiority, belligerence, or indeed arrogance, but because a little tweaking means it will better fit my circumstances. If I’m making a cake and haven’t got Demerara sugar, I use soft brown; *Strictly Come Dancing* is due to start in half an hour, so I’ll turn the temperature up a bit and usually it turns out just fine. The same goes for my approach to gardening instructions: I don’t profess to have knowledge superior to the experts, quite the contrary, but often I need to adapt their advice to suit my particular requirements or situation.

Anyway, here goes confessional time:

### Confession One – Peat

I am categorically opposed to the use of peat. So why is it

that I am using it in the garden today? When I arrived at the garden there were several large bales that the previous head gardener had purchased. Reasoning that the peat itself was not wicked, and that it would be even more sinful not to use it when it had already been processed, I used it to cosset the dahlia tubers over winter. When visitors came into the greenhouse, I was embarrassed by the (to me) very obvious mammoth in the room in the shape of trays of incriminating dahlias (fig. 1). Such was my guilt that, instead of ignoring it, I found myself pointing out its presence even though the visitors probably hadn’t noticed or didn’t care. Unfortunately, my sins are compounded as I also don’t buy plants which have been raised or potted exclusively in peat-free compost.

## Confession Two – Murder

### a) Premeditated

While top scientists are working day and night to harness the power of nuclear fusion, gardeners are deep in debate about the best way to protect their plants from mollusc attack. I would judge myself to be mid-range guilty in this sin – we do kill the slugs and snails, but we try not to kill everything else as well. We use slug pellets approved by the Soil Association, barriers and (I am blushing now) the ‘chop them in half’ method.

Another temptation is caterpillars – we all love butterflies but hate the damage their caterpillars often wreak. In the garden there are many self-seeded host plants for the incredible mullein moth, and I am willing to share (fig. 2), but when I found them munching my favourite *Verbascum*

‘Temptress Purple’ they were quickly evicted! As for the dreaded vine weevils, when found lurking in the greenhouse pots these voracious larvae’s next destination is the bird table. This disposal method goes a long way to abating my guilt, as surely feeding the robin cancels out the killing of the weevil.

In an attempt to trap aphids in the greenhouse we have used proprietary yellow sticky sheets. Unfortunately the sheets are not exclusively sticky to greenfly, frequently also imprisoning butterflies and bees. In the end it was too heart rending trying to free the good guys without loss of limb (theirs not mine) and I eventually removed the yellow perils, resorting to a more basic and messy squashing technique. Lastly, I felt even more guilt when I read that my prize *Araujia sericifera*

(fig. 3) captures unsuspecting moths at night by holding them by the proboscis, then releasing them later the next day – I had unwittingly unleashed a torturer on our night fliers! Now, every morning during the flowering season my first job is to check there are no victims needing to be released from the accurately named ‘Cruel Plant’.

### b) Accessory to the Fact

On an occasional basis I find dead creatures around the garden, mainly voles and field mice but sometimes birds. When I first arrived at Cliffe I was ill-prepared for ‘nature red in tooth and claw’, so when I found an obviously not-long-for-this-world mouse in the road I fetched some seed to make its last few minutes happier. When I returned it had disappeared. I convinced myself it had got



Fig. 2 I am usually willing to share the garden’s horticultural bounty, but not *Verbascum* ‘Temptress Purple’ with a mullein-moth larva.



Fig. 3 *Araujia sericifera*, aptly named ‘Cruel Plant’.

over its funny turn and was now snuggled up with its family eating hazelnuts. Over the last 8 years my softy city soul has atrophied, and no longer do I shed a tear over the corpses.

I do, however, often wonder if it is somehow my fault. Have I poisoned that little mouse? (One year all the ricinus seeds disappeared before I could gather them, which was a little worrying). Perhaps the poor blue tit caught a disease because the bird table wasn't cleaned often enough? To make amends, the dead are given a customised funeral rite, which involves being catapulted off the end of the shovel into the woods with a "May your God go with you" (thank you Dave Allen).

### Confession Three – Culling Plants

One of my favourite occupations is growing plants from seed, but even this innocuous task is full of anguish. The point when fun becomes fraught is when the moment comes to prick out and throw away surplus seedlings. After you've selected the largest and healthiest, how do you choose who lives or dies? Who is to say the smaller ones aren't just late starters? What horticultural stars am I denying the chance to shine? The upshot of this is that I pot on far too many, and those I don't manage to foist on to others just die of neglect later in their lives (fig. 4). Even thinning the radishes pricks my conscience.

### Confession Four – Plant Names

When it comes to plant names I am too trusting. The problem is that when I buy a plant or a pack of seed I believe what I read. I have neither the time nor the inclination to research each newcomer to the garden, and surely the suppliers know what they're doing? Not always, it appears. When I was visited by a VIHP (Very Important Horticultural Person) recently, he pointed out that our *Deutzia x hybrida* 'Magicien' was actually *Deutzia x hybrida* 'Strawberry Fields' (fig. 5), and that our *Sambucus nigra* f. *porphyrophylla* was really a cultivar he had introduced as 'Thundercloud'. In both cases I was rather pleased, as the true names are much easier to pronounce. More recently I was pointing out to all and sundry the spectacular flowers of *Lobelia bridgesii* only to discover that my plant doesn't look anything like *bridgesii* and is most likely the stunning *Lobelia excelsa* (fig. 6). So not only do I get it wrong, I pass this misinformation on to others, doubly guilty.

### Confession Five – Lackadaisicalness Tools

A well-worn maxim is 'use the right tool for the right job'. Which is all very well but, when you work in a garden with a terrain comparable to the foothills of the Himalaya



Fig. 4 Seedling city – how can any be discarded?



Fig. 5 We now know that this is *Deutzia x hybrida* 'Strawberry Fields'.

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### And other supposed short cuts

Pernicious weeds and seedheads find their way into the compost. You know you will pay for it in the end, but a moment's lack of concentration and whoops, where did that bindweed root go! As for diligently washing plant pots every season, I cannot tell a lie – it never happens and I have no plans to restart this regime. At best they might get a quick wipe down.

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Fig. 6 *Lobelia excelsa* is now known by its true name.

(fig. 7), if the right tool isn't at hand then you tend to compromise. In practice, improvisation is more likely on a Friday afternoon and it may involve planting with a hand fork, weeding with a trowel, or trying to cut through a sturdy branch with a pair of secateurs when really a pair of loppers would be the sensible choice. The resulting carnage means you have to get the loppers in the end to tidy up before anybody notices the poor workmanship. Tools are abused, occasionally left out in wind and rain, are lost for months in compost heaps, not oiled and sharpened on a regular basis, again the list is endless.

### Confession Six – Plant Cruelty

One of my worst sins is moving plants so that they subsequently die. A case in point was when I moved an *Anisodonteia capensis* (fig. 8) which was thriving in the position I had allotted it but squashing a *Grevillea* 'Canberra Gem'. Dutifully, I waited for the optimum conditions to move it, during a mild period in the spring – perfect. What followed almost immediately were



Fig. 7 The foothills of the garden discourage me from fetching the right tool for the job.

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unseasonably high temperatures followed by searing winds, all rounded off by sub-zero temperatures! You don't have to be psychic to work out what happened next, and eventually I had to admit that the victim was dead, and dispose of the body. Luckily in the greenhouse there was a rooted cutting to take its place.

My next confession might make me sound like a horticultural Imelda Marcos: sometimes I forget about a plant. One cold, late-autumn night I lay in bed and I suddenly thought – “The tree fern!” First thing next morning I rushed to find it, only to see it was blanketed with *Geranium procurrans* and looking exceedingly happy. This leads me to another transgression – taking credit for planting combinations which have nothing to do with my design expertise. A case in point is the scarlet blooms of *Papaver orientale* var. *bracteatum* growing through the zinging lime blooms of *Euphorbia x martini* ‘Ascot Rainbow’ (fig. 9).

Intentional neglect is unforgivable and I am guilty of this too. When asked if we lift our dahlias for winter, I reply “Yes, except the ones I don't like”. How rotten is that? For your information,

these unpopular specimens always make it through. My head hangs in shame.

### Confession Seven – Organic Practices

I attempt to be organic in the garden but if I examine my practices carefully I see I fall short in many areas. The seed I use is not always organic, neither are all the plants I buy. I haven't studied the rules carefully but tend to make an educated guess at what would be considered acceptable. Pesticides, herbicides and fertilisers are all used minimally, and then only when marked Organic. Guidelines change over the years, and I have found myself using something that has been removed from the list of approved substances, for example Bordeaux Powder. The goal posts move frequently and I am not sufficiently diligent to keep up with the latest regulations.

As I go about my business in the garden I take a quick look round to see if anyone is watching before I break the rules, expecting to be struck down by the great RHS examiner in the sky as I hotfoot it across the wet border, or use the pruning saw to divide a dormant perennial. Are you cringing, or are you thinking “I thought I was the

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Fig. 8 *Anisodonte capensis* gave up the ghost after being moved.

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Fig. 9 I can claim no credit for this plant combination – *Papaver orientale* var. *bracteatum* growing through *Euphorbia x martini* ‘Ascot Rainbow’.

only sinner who did that”? So I place myself at your mercy, kind jury, to decide my fate. The stocks? The cooler? Washing all those dirty pots? Before you decide which punishment you will inflict on this guilty gardener I would like to proffer one final line of defence – let him that is without sin cast the first stone. Happy gardening! 🙏

**Gill Heavens**, when she's not on her knees in penitence, turns cartwheels on the cliffs in North Devon.