

It is really a very exciting process, going through the Seed Distribution list, especially now that we have the accompanying Descriptive Database on the HPS website (fig 1). Faced with such a huge choice, I seem to be prompted by a different 'policy' each year, turning last time to some old foliage favourites that I hadn't grown for years.

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Fig. 1 It really is a very exciting process...

On opening the envelope containing my allocation, I was delighted to find *Atriplex hortensis* var. *rubra*. I can hear your gasps of incredulity from here! How can someone who presumes to flaunt her horticultural knowledge in such a prestigious publication as this, seriously put Red Orach at the top of her seed list? Very easily, for this handsome, easy to grow, foliage plant is a gem. Part of the huge tribe of mealy-leaved weeds that includes Fat Hen (*Amaranthaceae*), it has deep maroon, arrow-shaped foliage on plants that can grow to more than a metre tall. I haven't grown this annual for years, but seeing it listed between *Athamanta* and *Aurinia*, I could suddenly picture it adding drama to a group of pink and white cosmos and the dark maroon cornflower 'Black Ball'. Smart, don't you think?

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**Trends, Shoots and Leaves<sup>1</sup>**  
**Judy Harry** considers fashions in foliage, and recommends plants which have stood the test of time.



Fig. 2 Perhaps a step too far

So what was it that made me turn my attention once more to what you might call a beginner's foliage plant? I suspect it is something to do

<sup>1</sup>With acknowledgement and apologies to Lynne Truss.



Fig. 3 Highly collectable *Pulmonaria* 'Rowlatt Choules' photographed at Norwell Nurseries – one you might want with an irrational desire.

with the curious cycle of how plants emerge as evidence of one's own gardening trends. I used to grow it; it died out; I stopped thinking about it; now I want to grow it again because I'm reminded of how effective it can be.

It is easy to see why some foliage plants become fashionable. Sometimes, and

*Heuchera* is a classic example, it is because an energetic plant breeder and nurseryman becomes besotted with a genus, and has the promotional skills to get us hooked too. After a while, though, we perhaps get indigestion, finding that we cannot distinguish one from another, and that the

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Fig. 4 Having been advised by her father...

developments towards shades of lime cum orange cum gold are perhaps a step too far (fig. 2). However, since there are many specialist suppliers of an apparently endless list of varieties of unimagined colours, I must be wrong. My jaundiced view is probably more to do with the fact that my garden really does not suit



Fig. 5 I lost my table vital points...

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Fig. 6 *Artemisia maritimum* with the pretty annual *Gillia capitata*.

these plants; they are not 'trending' for me, now or at any other time.

HPS members may find themselves becoming collectors of a genus once they join a Specialist Group, and I am sure that members of the Pulmonaria Group never have enough examples of these dual-purpose plants whose handsome foliage contributes so much to the leaf tapestry of our gardens. Stamps, beer mats, sports cars, pulmonarias; if you see one you haven't got in your collection you want it with an almost irrational desire (fig. 3); trends really have little to do with it.

We are, however, often influenced by garden writers whose passions by default become our own. I have in my gardening library Mrs. Desmond Underwood's *Grey and Silver Plants*, first published in 1971<sup>2</sup>. In her preface she explains that, having been advised by her father that it was pointless to try to grow delphiniums and lilies in 'a plot surrounded by a holly hedge and riddled with elm roots', she learned to concentrate on plants that 'knew how to withstand drought' (fig. 4). As I garden on the dry eastern side of the country, this useful reference

work might have been aimed straight at me. Silver-leaved plants remain favourites, and I pride myself on being knowledgeable about them. So it was that at a Lincolnshire Group's Christmas party quiz, I lost my table vital points (fig. 5) by stating firmly that the fragrant, filigree leaves given to us to identify, came not from the more obvious genus *Artemisia* but from the closely related *Seriphidium*. Too clever by half! The plant was an artemisia, and I kept very quiet for the rest of the afternoon. [Both plants are now named as artemisias!]

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Fig. 7 The courtyard at the back of the Old Manor House, Heslington.



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Fig. 8 *Sedum* 'Little Missy' makes a lovely container plant.



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Fig. 9 The spring fronds of *Polystichum setiferum* (Divisilobum Group).



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Fig. 10 Nurserymen struggle to convince us...



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Fig. 11 *Heliopsis helianthoides* Loraine Sunshine = 'Helhan' (PBR): like it or loathe it

Actually, I was half right: several wormwoods have been put into the genus *Seriphidium*, and what I mistook for *S. maritimum* is one of them. This is a pretty, freshly scented plant for dry soils where it will ramble gently about. Like many of its cousins, it has the ability to set the scene for more flamboyant and colourful flowering plants (fig. 6).

Which brings us to another reason for foliage plants becoming fashionable: their usefulness in containers. Traditionally, containers were filled with burgeoning bouquets of colourful, often half-hardy, summer bedding plants padded out with leafy plants. Nowadays the foliage is often there as a feature in its own right. In the summer of 2013 I visited the garden of the well-known flower arranger George Smith at the Manor House, Heslington in

Yorkshire. As is often the case with floral artists, the use of foliage in the garden is masterly. The courtyard at the back of the Manor House provides a complete tutorial in using foliage for containers, where the principle that 'less is often more' applies (fig. 7). Once we got to the plant sales area, my head being full of leafy thoughts, I immediately homed in on a tiny-leaved, variegated cream-and-green *Sedum* 'Little Missy' (fig. 8) which has proved to be a lovely neat container plant.

Another reason for liking foliage is the way that it signals the seasons, especially with spring growth. Hosta shoots are wonderful: hard, determined, and pointed like rockets. Developing much earlier, the entirely different young shoots of aquilegias present a confusion of detailed glaucous vitality. I have read Derry Watkins



Fig. 12 A farming friend says...

listing the rather similar, though more colourful, young foliage of *Thalictrum* 'Elin' as a valuable plant for the March garden. To this I would add the coloured young leaves of some delphiniums, several geraniums, and the inky-blue young shoots of *Thermopsis lanceolata*. This rarely mentioned member of the genus is a lovely plant, clumping, rather than running like *T. rhombifolia* var. *montana*, with flowers of a soft creamy lemon. I also enjoy the first leaves of the many border sedums, nestling on the ground like so many tiny glaucous cabbages. But it must be ferns (fig. 9), with their gradual progress from the curled to the upright, that embody the essence of spring.

When 'out shopping', gardeners are well known for

their weakness for a plant in flower. Nurserymen struggle to convince us (fig. 10) that we would be better off buying the one in bud, rather than the less good one that is flowering its head off and possibly heading for an early demise. It is odd that we need convincing, for we have a very well-developed understanding and knowledge of plant growth, and know that the condition and colouring of foliage tells us much, often warning that all may not be well with a plant.

It is not an infallible diagnostic however: every year I regard the sickly, pale yellowy-green young leaves of *Alstroemeria psittacina* with concern. However, I think of Thelma Kay, whom some of you will remember for her knowledge of less-than-hardy plants which she wrapped up

Fig. 13 I never tire of variegated *Iris pseudacorus* spring foliage, teamed here with the gold-leaved form of Lemon Balm.

every winter in old jumpers, saying that hers did the same. So now I know that as spring progresses, these hideous leaves will darken and, by the late summer, when this plant flowers, they will play their part in setting off the elegant blooms of cream, green and garnet. The visual relationship of leaves to flowers is an interestingly subjective one, and tends to divide gardeners. My personal dislike of *Heliopsis helianthoides* **Lorraine Sunshine** (fig. 11) is based on my anxiety that the pale leaf and dark veins are really screaming "I am sick: help!" But I love the pale gold foliage of 'Bowles's Golden Grass' (*Milium effusum* 'Aureum') which a farming friend says looks as if it's got Barley Yellow Dwarf Virus<sup>3</sup>. As always, beauty is in the eye of the beholder (fig. 12).

<sup>3</sup>The most commonly found virus of cereal crops, causing yellowing of the leaves, inefficient photosynthesis and dwarfed growth.



Fig. 14 Elegantly striped dresses...

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Fig. 15 Old-fashioned 'Gardener's Garters' coping with dry shade: behind it is the pretty Wood Melick *Melica uniflora*.

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Fig. 16 The fabulous foliage of *Mertensia maritima* is in fact edible.

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Fig. 17 Foliage of *Aruncus dioicus* 'Kneiffii' is much more reliable than its flowers.

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Fig. 18 The strangely distorted foliage of *Sambucus nigra* 'Linearis'.

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I also love stripy leaves, from the old (now eclipsed by more-fashionable grasses) *Phalaris arundinacea* var. *picta* to various irises with striped leaves: I have for years enjoyed the smart foliage of *Iris pseudacorus* 'Variegata', *I. foetidissima* 'Variegata', and *I. pallida* 'Argentea Variegata' (fig. 13) in my garden. This can all be traced back to my childhood love of historical-costume colouring books, where the eighteenth century volume featured elegantly striped dresses (fig. 14). Of course, as a child I also loved the common name for *Phalaris*, 'Gardener's Garters', and I'm pleased to have it now in a desperately dry and shady corner (fig. 15) which it tolerates with grace and, usefully, some restraint, for it can be annoyingly invasive. Currently, none of these plants is particularly trendy,

although when I started growing them more than thirty years ago they were spoken and written of quite often.

A plant that had a hugely popular spell in the 1990s was the excitingly glaucous *Cerinthe major* 'Purpurascens'. The HPS Seed Distribution was soon inundated with bulging packets of the typically giant-sized black *Boraginaceae* seeds and those of us who flocked to grow it found it made a particularly easy and dramatic feature plant for dry, gravelled areas. It is rarely mentioned now. Fleshy glaucous leaves are a feature of another member of the borage family, *Mertensia maritima* (at various times also known as *M. simplicissima* and *M. s.* subsp. *asiatica*) (fig. 16). This is a fabulous plant and in the view of friends who grow it, 'if you can create a northern



Fig. 19 ... only bettered by Bob Brown...

beach for it, you've cracked it'. Good drainage is the key, and where it is happy it will self-seed with enthusiasm.

Plants with narrow thread-like leaves can be very effective, and I grow *Aruncus dioicus* 'Kneiffii' (fig. 17) primarily as a foliage plant, cutting out the flowering stems, for I hate the way the creamy flowers all too soon turn a dingy brown. This cruel treatment of course encourages the mound of finely cut foliage which makes a persistently lovely picture.

'Lovely picture' is perhaps not an appropriate description for a strange form of elder, *Sambucus nigra* 'Linearis' (fig. 18), but I grow it out of affection for the man with whom it is associated. E. A. Bowles, the famous Edwardian plant collector, gardener and writer, had an area of his garden devoted to horticultural abnormalities which he called 'The Lunatic

Asylum'. Writing in *My Garden in Spring*<sup>4</sup>, he says 'another Elder has been certified insane and admitted to this select company. Its madness consists in the greater portion of the lamina of the leaf blades being reduced to a mere thread, and it looks as though an army of locusts or caterpillars had halted to dine on it'. A wonderful description, only bettered by Bob Brown who describes the leaves as 'thread-like and twisted – as if sprayed with [the herbicide] 2,4-D' (fig. 19). Another supplier describes it more kindly as 'a rare texture plant for the creative garden designer'. Ah, that's more like it.

Another oddity which I first grew years ago, and which turned up again unexpectedly last year, is the annual *Malva verticillata* 'Crispa' (fig. 20). It grows very tall, and is of interest only for its foliage, since the flowers are tiny and almost hidden in the leaf axils. The large leaves are silky glossy and have beautifully curled edges as if an enthusiastic laundry maid has gone at them with a goffering iron. Having been rather uncomplimentary earlier on about heuchera, I confess to liking this characteristic of many varieties. *Heuchera micrantha* 'Ruffles', for example, has green, softly hairy foliage, while the perhaps better-known *H.* 'Chocolate Ruffles' has rich brown, more shiny leaves;



Fig. 20 *Malva verticillata* 'Crispa' is a rarely seen annual.



Fig. 21 The probably unfashionable *Lysimachia ciliata* 'Firecracker' doing a wonderful supporting job.

both have lovely curly edges.

I started this article with an enthusiastic endorsement of the purple-leaved *Atriplex* and to this I would add another very useful, and very common, dark leaved plant,



Fig. 22 We should never underestimate the part that foliage plays in the garden.

*Lysimachia ciliata* 'Firecracker'. It bears the RHS Award of Garden Merit, telling us that it's regarded as being 'of outstanding excellence for garden decoration or use'. Yes, I know it runs, and I know that the flowers are yellow (which counts as a disadvantage in some circles) but I still think that it can play a most useful part in the border. The impact of dark foliage against hot colours is well known, and I was delighted to find it one day obligingly supporting an old coppery-red *Hemerocallis* (name unknown as it was inherited from my mother:

any ideas anyone?) (fig. 21). But I would guess that this plant is not fashionable at the moment, and that may be simply because we have got too used to it: in short, we are bored by it.

This danger applies perhaps to a lot of foliage: we are so used to it that we stop noticing how important it is (fig. 22). Any gardening book that goes in detail into the characteristics of the leaf should reawaken our respect: a leaf can be long and linear, orbicular, deltoid; with edges that are ciliate, lobed, denticulate, incised; and put together to form leaves that



Fig. 23 Leaf

are pinnate, palmate, trifoliate and so on and so on. They can be green, gold, cream, silver, red, purple, and mixtures of any of these. They can be shiny or dull, smooth or hairy, evergreen or deciduous, tough or tender. Not bad going for something that has just four letters to its name (fig. 23). While this article has been able to talk of only a minute fraction of leaves in all their variety, I hope it will have reminded us of the importance of this vital and lovely component of our gardens. We should value it, and if necessary, ignore fashion trends. 🌿

**Judy Harry** currently fields horticultural queries sent to the HPS website which, if she cannot come up with a sensible solution, she passes on to the very many experts to be found among the membership.