



Fig. 11 *G. pratense* 'Black Beauty' with heleniums at Meadow Farm Nursery Garden (courtesy of Rob and Diane Cole).

How marvellous to have the opportunity to give due praise to what has been voted a top favourite, indeed indispensable, genus by HPS members in the past.

But has not everything to be said about these delightful flowers been said already, and are they still relevant to the way we garden today?

So many exciting new plants jostle for our attention when we consider how to furnish to the most pleasing effect any piece of ground, that it becomes not just an intellectual exercise but a kind of challenge.

As geraniums are a truly diverse group of plants within which there is a suitable species or cultivar for almost any garden situation, it seems to me they are still able to meet this challenge – to beautify our gardens and give pleasure to the senses in many different ways.

Geraniums – what picture do they conjure up for you:

- pools of colour at the front of or in a summer border?
- small hummocks studded with jewel-like blooms atop a raised bed?
- larger hummocks along some paving, characterful in or out of flower?
- ground cover with attractive leaves and flowers?

or perhaps

- a few demure dots of colour among ferns in a shady place?

For me, having gardened in a space large enough to offer diverse habitats and for long enough to try out many different kinds, geraniums mean all of these things, but time changes one's priorities. I now need plants that give much visual pleasure with the minimum of fussing for as long a season as possible and I have learnt, from experience, that some geraniums answer these needs better than others.

Geraniums – a personal appraisal

Ursula Williams
finds geraniums
old and new
indispensable



Fig. 1 *G.* 'Sue Crùg' peeps enchantingly through the leaves of *Syringa meyeri* 'Palibin' AGM.



Fig. 2 *G.* 'Salome' clambering over a raised bed and offering a little shade to some smaller plants.



Fig. 3 *G.* 'Joy'.



Fig. 4



Figs 4 & 5 *G. 'Pink Delight'* (foreground right) basking in the well-drained conditions of a raised bed along with plants appreciating similar conditions.

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With the list of new introductions growing ever longer, perhaps this is a good time to consider which 'oldies' continue to be indispensable and which newcomers deserve similar accolades.

It will be almost impossible to do justice to this beautiful genus within the limitations of a few pages but here is a short, backward, sideways and forward look at a few geraniums.

In days before all the wizards with a computer screen could summon colourful images and much relevant information with the click of a mouse, part of the pleasure of learning what was 'out there' meant tracking down what was on one's wish list. This was achieved mainly by sourcing nurseries run by owners, indeed experts, such as Elizabeth Strangman (Washfield), D. Hibberd (Axletree) or R. Lee (Coombland Gardens), where much good advice was usually offered. Often this led to the purchase of what remain favourites of mine today; an example is *G. 'Sue Crûg'* (fig. 1), which was proffered from behind a shed at Axeltree Nursery and has become one of my indispensables. With strikingly marked flowers on a reasonably compact plant 'Sue Crûg' is sometimes likened to *G. 'Salome'* (fig. 2) (one of its parents), but the colour is not really the same. Like 'Salome' it tolerates a little shade, has a similar scrambling habit, and has a long season.

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At Washfield Nursery I was urged to buy *G. 'Brookside'*, then a new introduction.

Its finely cut leaves and clear blue flowers look lovely dancing around a large patch of *Hakonechloa macra* 'Alboarea' AGM – very effective without one plant overwhelming the other. Later in the season *G. wallichianum* 'Buxton's Variety' performs in the same way.

Coombland Gardens offered *G.* 'Joy' (fig. 3) and *G.* 'Coombland White', both hybrids of *G. lambertii* x *traversii* var. *elegans*, both very long flowering with lovely blooms and leaves, but only 'Joy' remains with me and I would not be without her.

All the hybrids with *G. traversii* blood seem to have particularly attractive leaves. For this reason, as well as a profuse display of delightful pink flowers on a short, neat plant, *G.* 'Pink Delight' (figs 4 & 5) is a real treasure for a well-drained sunny position and is about to be introduced to the HPS Conservation Scheme.

G. 'Dusky Crûg' (fig. 6), another small hybrid with similar but dusky reddish-brown leaves and a long display of pink flowers, is often recommended for growing in a pot and looks super grown in this way. However it seems particularly susceptible to vine weevil attack under these conditions and so has reluctantly been given up.

Thinking about the parentage of various hybrids and how it influences their culture makes me realise, once again, how important it is to do some research and I am pleased that our recently published HPS *Geraniums* booklet provides this information.

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Fig. 6 *G.* 'Dusky Crûg'.

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Fig. 7 *G.* 'Russell Prichard' with *Sedum telephium* subsp. *ruprechtii*.

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Fig. 8 *G. striatum* 'Splendens' mingling with aquilegia foliage.



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Fig. 9 *G. wlassovianum* supporting the drying flower heads of *Allium schubertii*.



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Fig. 10 *G. pratense* 'Plenum Violaceum' forms an admirable background for the yellow flowers of hemerocallis.

I have had enough disappointments with some groups of geraniums to know that if they are to become long-lived 'indispensables' it is essential to give consideration to their origins. I have nearly lost the splendid 'Joy' twice because I ignored the fact that one of its parents is at home on well-drained cliffs in the Chatham Islands and the other in the damp Himalayas. 'Joy' needs a sunny position in reasonably moisture-retentive but well-drained soil and may well decide that cold, wet winter soil is not to her liking.

Quite a number of the newer hybrids have *G. wallichianum* ancestry and have inherited the lovely leaves, scrambling habit and long flowering season of that species. What is possibly less well known to the novice gardener is that they also inherit the need for that mythical well-drained but moisture-retentive soil and, ideally, a little shade from really hot sun.

While on the subject of learning, gathering information, research, call it what you wish, there is absolutely no substitute for a guide book. To be able to reach for an easy-to-handle, paper-backed book like Dr. Hibberd's *Hardy Geraniums* (in the RHS Wisley Handbook Series, my 2003 edition still amazingly relevant today) or the HPS *Geraniums* booklet by Margaret Stone, with its well-illustrated and up-to-date list of cultivars, is a great pleasure.

Learning, of course also means making mistakes, remembering that sometimes descriptions such as 'unusual', 'fascinating' or 'worthy of close inspection' may bring disappointment. Some years ago I was seduced by reading about *G. sinense* and who could resist 'velvety, maroon, backswept petals' and I had to have it! After it was acquired I planted it lovingly, and in due course I trotted to my carefully chosen edge of woodland spot to inspect and admire but

was greeted by a somewhat lanky plant with a few, small, gloomy-looking flowers. When I read later that it is peculiarly attractive to wasps I did not hasten to inspect it so often, and I was not heartbroken when it eventually faded away.

Any list of truly wonderful oldies must surely be headed by *G. 'Mavis Simpson'* AGM and *G. x riversleaianum 'Russell Prichard'* AGM, both outstanding plants, however and wherever they are used, as long as it is remembered that they both need reasonably well-drained soil and plenty of room to spread, as well as division every few years. 'Russell Prichard' (fig. 7) is occasionally compared with *G. 'Little Gem'* of similar parentage, but to me there is brilliance, a special shine to the deep pink-magenta petals in the former which 'Little Gem' does not possess.

G. 'Mavis Simpson' is just so pretty for a very long season. Again it makes pools of colour, pale pink this time, and I saw it

recently, positioned between well-trimmed dark-green shrubs flanking a simple flight of grey stone steps – absolutely lovely.

What of the little gems belonging to the *G. cinereum* group which are indispensable for many well-drained positions? I can only accommodate two or three but wish I had room for more. Whether an oldie like ‘Laurence Flatman’ or a more recent hybrid like *Rothbury Gem*, they are all exquisite and repay close study.

I find the whole *sanguineum* tribe very garden worthy. Planted along an edge of border or paving they form particularly comfortable ‘humps and bumps’, studded with variously white, pink, purple, reddish-coloured blooms, sometimes with pleasing striations. Long lived, long flowering and demanding little attention, they are definitely plants every garden should have. How is one to choose from about 30 cultivars? After growing several over a period of years, I came to the conclusion that *G. sanguineum* var. *striatum* ‘Splendens’ (fig. 8) is the one for me, although *G. ‘Elke’* is charming too. Beware ‘Tiny Monster’ – a hybrid – unless you have lots of space.

The plants of the *G. endressii* and *x oxonianum* groups present me with a problem. Too important as groups to ignore, their general usefulness in many situations may well mean that they are essential in your garden. With almost too many cultivars

(is one allowed to say that?), many of them quite vigorous and occupying a lot of space, sometimes needing support, often requiring shearing, I do not find them as indispensable as I did in the past. However, odd seedlings pop up now and again and are welcome but they have to fend for themselves.

This leads me to a point which can be overlooked at times. No small bulbs enjoy being smothered by strong growers, but all kinds of early flowers and bulbs can thrive under the skirts of quite a few hybrid geraniums as long as the old foliage is removed early in the year. Indeed the emerging, fresh geranium foliage is most attractive with some bulbous plants.

One of my most valued geraniums, *G. wlassovianum* (fig. 9), provides a great foil and support for other plants, as well as flowering for a long summer period and generally dying off with attractive autumn foliage.

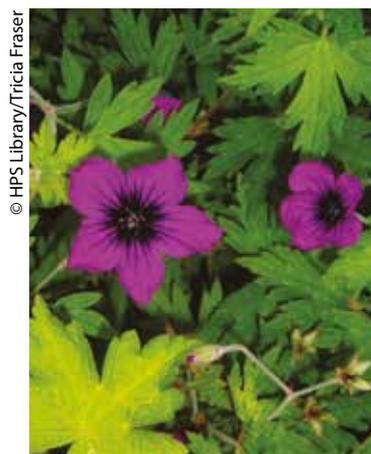


Fig. 12 *G. ‘Anne Thomson’*.

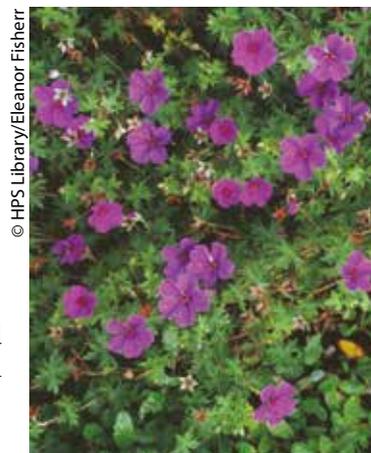


Fig. 13 *G. ‘Dilys’*.



Fig. 14 *G. Rozanne* blending with *Hakonechloa*.



Fig. 15 *G. Rozanne* under a pine tree at Meadow Farm Nursery and Gardens (courtesy of Rob and Diane Cole).

Among the providers of the, for me, essential colour blue in the garden, I now find the cultivars of *G. pratense* on the whole too labour intensive (large patches of long stalks with masses of seedheads demanding prompt removal). There are two exceptions: the first, *G. p.* 'Mrs. Kendall Clark', is so lovely that self-sown seedlings which generally come true are treasured; my second choice from this group is *G. p.* 'Plenum Violaceum' (fig. 10), which seems to me to be the best of the double-flowered *pratense* types. I may have been just fortunate but I have never encountered mildew on this plant, and the intensity of the deep purple-blue clusters of small rosettes is a good contrast

with cream-coloured anemisis or leucanthemums in their long season.

Although not blue, I find hybrids such as 'Anne Thomson' (fig. 12), *Dragon Heart*, 'Kanahitobanawa' and 'Dilys' (fig. 13) mix better with other border occupants. They weave their way in and around, enhancing so many plants that I find them quite indispensable too.

Now I must, unreservedly, praise *G. Rozanne* (figs 14 & 15) although some of you may think it too much of a good thing. From the moment I saw it at Chelsea on Blooms of Bressingham's display, like a blue river running through wonderful supporting planting, I felt it answered all my 'blue



Fig. 16 *G. cantabrigiense* 'St Ola'

needs' during its long season.

Blue to enhance yellow or gold daylilies; blue in a cool corner with the white droplets of Fuchsia 'Hawkshead'; blue arms clambering between purple *Pittosporum tenuifolium* 'Tom Thumb' and apricot *Abutilon* 'Kentish Belle'; a blue mound fronting shimmering *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Morning Light'; blue covering the ground most satisfactorily after spring bulbs have died down. The list of this plant's virtues could continue and it is also amenable to being supported by plant stakes which become invisible and raise the whole plant in a confined space. In addition to the fun to be had with plant combinations, a single specimen also looks striking in a large pot as a friend grows it. Truly indispensable.

I shall, regretfully, have to skip quickly through the many species so useful in shady situations.

GG. macrorrhizum, phaeum, nodosum, sylvaticum, etc., may well be indispensable to you, and when I see illustrations of, for example, the subtle charm and tints in the many *G. phaeum* cultivars, I long for a mass planting. Similarly with *G. macrorrhizum* cultivars, which are great survivors in sometimes quite inhospitable situations. But if space is limited and there are dryish places to be furnished, *G. x cantabrigiense* will fill that role perfectly. All the cultivars are charming but I find the white 'St Ola' (fig. 16) most appealing.

G. nodosum (fig. 17) does seed and the seedlings may be inconvenient but its easy-going nature, tolerating sun and quite deep shade and the varied markings on the petals make it indispensable to me. One patch under and surrounding a beautiful but lanky *Hydrangea villosa* has given pleasure over many weeks.

So much pleasure from such small flowers and I have not even touched upon the varied beauty of geranium leaves. They are an important visual aspect of many geraniums and may well have significant roles to play in your garden. The diversity of shape, colour and texture is amazing. For example, *G. traversii* var. 'Elegans' has passed some of its leaves' quality to numerous hybrids but the species itself with the sculptural, almost

chiselled greeny, silvered foliage is without compare, as is *G. renardii* (fig. 18). Seedlings of *G. renardii* may have more vigour but do not quite possess the velvety, quilted, textural quality of the species.

Of the many variants within certain species and cultivars with strikingly marked or coloured leaves who could live without *G. phaeum* var. *phaeum* 'Samobor' (fig. 19) or *G. x oxianum* 'Katherine Adele'.

In the early days of our local HPS group we were invited to a member's garden where one of the most memorable features was a prominent raised border planted exclusively with a variety of the larger-growing geraniums – not for the flowers but specifically the leaves. They had been given a severe haircut (maybe more than once by the husband, may I say) and the whole effect of the recent growth was superb.

To conclude, I have never been particularly keen on the combination of yellow leaves with pink (or even blue) flowers but very recently I was given a gift of *G. 'Lilac Ice'* – a sport from *G. Rozanne*. I am delighted by what I can only describe as its sheer prettiness with its pleasing combination of flowers and leaves and will have to swallow my prejudice. So there you have it – a garden without geraniums? Not for me! 🌸



Fig. 17 *G. nodosum* in the shade with Feverfew.

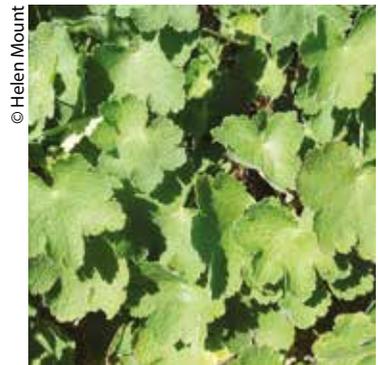


Fig 18 *G. renardii* leaves showing their rich texture as a foil for other plants even after the flowers have faded.



Fig 19 Good marked form of *G. phaeum* var. *phaeum* 'Samobor' providing longer seasonal interest after the spring flowers have faded.

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