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**“Curiouser and
curiouser,”
said Alice**

Janet Sleep

Fig. 1 Inspecting the border at Wollerton Old Hall.

It had been a cold wet spring and the weather at the end of May was still beyond poor, but that was not to deter us as we headed west to explore Wollerton Old Hall Garden (fig. 1). I never did discover what these two were so entranced by, but given the quality of everything in this garden it was sure to be addictively engaging. Perhaps it was because of the tardiness of the season and the lack of flower-power on show, that I began to take a more selective interest in what was before me and simply to look more objectively at what I was seeing. When you do this, when you really look, what is apparently commonplace and taken for granted starts to look downright strange – indeed, ‘curiouser and curiouser’.

Let’s start with an obvious one (fig. 2) – here are the unfolding fronds of a superb fern, *Polystichum setiferum* of the Plumosomultilobum Group. Viewed up close they

are totally otherworldly with all that tightly curled scaliness – enough to give an infant a hide-behind-the-sofa moment. Mostly we don’t get the full impact of this shock, as the plant is probably hiding away amongst shrubs or simply displaying itself too low down, at ankle height, but you can elevate it to a more prominent position (fig. 3).

Here it is placed in two large pots flanking a north-facing gateway. There had been box pyramids but they had seen better days, and I was looking for a replacement and happened to have some ferns on the go. It has worked splendidly as these ferns, despite their luscious, velvet greenery when fully developed, are remarkably dry-tolerant. Of course they do appreciate feeding and watering but they are not as demanding as many other subjects; moreover, they stay handsome for much of the winter.

Fig. 4 shows another fern, *Athyrium niponicum* ‘Silver Falls’, which manages to be just as startling and at all stages, from the deep maroon red of the unfurling fronds to the pewter and intense silver of maturity. So unsettling is this colour combination that you have to keep checking that your eyes have not deceived you. It is entirely deciduous so the winter cold is no threat, but it will not stand sun or drought so you will wonder how I satisfy these requirements in bone-dry Norfolk. In fact I have created two raised beds very near the house, composed entirely of garden compost. They are close enough to where I pass to never be forgotten and near enough to make watering that much easier. The origin of that silvery sheen is a bit confusing because we normally associate it with the waxy or soft, hairy covering of sun lovers and drought-resistant plants, not of shade and moisture lovers.



Fig. 2 *Polystichum setiferum* Plumosomultilobum Group growing in a large pot, the better to alarm you with its scaly crosiers.



Fig. 3 North-facing gateway with two ferns in flanking pots – almost trouble-free gardening.

The good point is that, unlike hostas, athyriums seem to be ignored by slugs and snails – well, you have to win some of the time.

If it were not for the little blue *Anemone blanda* in Beth Chatto's Garden (fig. 5), you might think that you had been dropped on to some alien planet. The

emerging leaves of *Bergenia* 'Wintermärchen' and iris spears look starkly different, as if some vaguely malign force were at work deep underground to produce this livid irruption. I think this is Tate Modern stuff rather than the National Gallery. This little bergenia is built on more delicate

lines than others, and twists its leaves obligingly so that you can see the coloured reverse. Eventually there are deep rosy blooms at about 30cms, but my feeling is that they would spoil the effect – much too civilised. Grown like this in air, sun and relatively poor soil, it will never get big and ungainly. Indeed many of this genus would do equally well with these conditions – and isn't the little anemone liking it too. Perhaps we should all bring it out from the crowded and half-shady borders where we expect it to excel. As a matter of fact I have a not very secret passion for bergenias: they are much misunderstood – Christopher Lloyd was rude about them in his time – but I expect that puts them in good company.

If you like irruptions of the more explosive kind then you will adore *Pennisetum macrourum* (fig. 6), shown here growing in latest October on a dry bank at Gravetye Manor in Sussex. Normally you would see it grown rather too well and too tall and peeping out from the back of a well-filled border. But how brilliant to take this plant, starve it a bit to toughen it up, and grow it in a front-of-house position. It's an animal that has escaped from the zoo, it seems, but not to worry, it is a sheep in wolf's clothing, not a thug at all. The sweet little aster growing close by is perfectly safe.

Another plant that does an end-of-season explosion is *Kniphofia rooperi* (fig. 7), here in the sunken garden at Great Dixter. The emerging flower stems look as if they have evil intent and the fully formed blooms, of such distinctive shape with their club-like medusa heads, are constructed as if to intimidate and amaze. It will perform in September in the soft south, but I have seen it in full fig at the end of October looming out of the mists on a hillside in Shropshire. Now that did look startling. To get the full impact you have to take out the whole of the spent stems as they go over: you do not want any hint of fragility to spoil the belligerent effect. All kniphofias benefit from good soil and enough moisture in summer and, though the winter foliage can look rather straggly, it is best to keep it intact to protect the crown; the leaves may be shortened by half in the spring, when a general tidy up is in order.

By the time we have reached the end of October, little is expected of most gardens. Not so at Gravetye Manor where the show must go on. Fig. 8 shows what can be achieved with the help of annuals and half-hardies, but the star here is the strange and wonderful hardy perennial, *Euphorbia palustris*, which is giving a last hurrah by colouring deeply into yellow, pink and orange and doing its best to look like something out of a tropical aquarium. Now it must be



Fig. 4 *Athyrium niponicum* 'Silver Falls', an elegant if startling fern for moistish shade in leafy soil.

noted that to achieve this brilliant effect some planning has been called for, as also some serious restraint. First, it likes rather moist soil and it is not getting that here, merely good soil with plenty of heart. It is also getting a baking, front-of-border position. All this contributes just enough stress to encourage the plant to colour nicely. Treated too well, it would probably never colour at all. Also, note, no staking or propping has been done of all that lavish extension growth and it has been allowed to lean, loll and writhe over a wide area. You would have to allow for that by planting only early bulbs and the like in the near vicinity. Imagine the scene if this plant had been carefully staked and straitjacketed – all that other-worldly effect would evaporate in an instant.



Fig. 5 A scene in Beth Chatto's early April garden where *Bergenia* 'Wintermärchen', some early irises and *Anemone blanda* are taking centre stage.



Fig. 6 *Pennisetum macrourum* at Gravetye Manor in very late October.

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Fig. 7 *Kniphofia rooperi* doing its best to grab your attention in another exuberant planting in Great Dixter's sunken garden.

Yes I know that there are readers out there who will be affronted by such sloppiness, but remember, one must suffer to be beautiful.

It is said that all life on land originated from the sea and it does not take much imagination to visualise the



Fig. 9 A hamamelis grown from seed in Janet's garden.



Fig. 8 *Euphorbia palustris* showing its ancestral relationship with the octopus at Gravetye Manor at the end of October.

crowded blooms on this hamamelis (fig. 9) as a newly hatched batch of baby crabs crawling up out of the water and on to the safe perch of a driftwood branch. Of course the crabs are of the exotic, copper-coloured kind – actually a mixture of red and orangey yellow when you analyse the flowers more carefully, but how they cheer the winter gloom and what a brave show they make.

I cannot tell you what the name of this particular shrub is, for I grew it from seed obtained from a seed exchange, possibly even from the HPS itself. I had no great

hopes of it, for one can never predict what the outcome of a seed sowing will produce, but experimentation is all and sometimes one is properly rewarded, as here. Please can I take this opportunity to recommend that you too take to collecting seed and contributing to the seed exchange. I love the whole process from beginning to end: first getting the new list and spending hours choosing; the anticipation of waiting for the seed to arrive; sowing in bright expectation, yet the constant surprise at the miracle of germination – and what a bargain. Try it and see. 🦑

Janet Sleep writes from deepest Norfolk, where the only thing reliable about the weather is that a drought is sure to arrive at some point soon.