



Fig. 1 "You Hardy Planters..."

Very many years ago, I was rather stung by a friend remarking "You Hardy Planters only like a plant if it's hard to get hold of, small and greeny, and you have to bend down to appreciate it" (fig. 1). Around this time, a visitor to the garden fixed me with a challenging look and ominously pronounced "I prefer to have a bit of

colour in my garden".

A little frankly expressed opinion goes a long way. But, as always with criticism, implied or direct, one should take a step back and reflect. Do we, as a breed, perhaps prefer understated, obscure and reclusive plants? And do our gardens tend to ooze restraint and good taste when it comes to colour?

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## Guilty as charged?

Judy Harry

It's probably true to say that for some, or many of us, bright colour is not our first consideration when we select plants. It is certainly true that we love to have something rare and unusual, and in this respect we sometimes fall prey to competitive urges which fortunately do not characterise the Society as a whole.



Fig. 2 It lingered on...

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Fig 3 There is something very beguiling about the velvety leaves of *Pulmonaria mollis*.



Fig. 4 They say you can tell a Hardy Planter's garden at first glance.

At this point I should confess that, on an HPS visit, I once spiritedly pounced on a pot of the then quite new, variegated *Euphorbia polychroma* 'Lacy'<sup>1</sup> (now *E. epithymoides* 'Lacy'), and carried it off in triumph.

Did it prosper? No, of course not: it lingered on, desperate to revert to plain green, and took an interminable time to die, thereby giving me plenty of time to reflect on my greed (fig. 2).

Although I like variegated plants, I do love the colour green in the garden and get an enormous amount of satisfaction, to give just one example, from gazing on the huge velvety, plain green leaves of *Pulmonaria mollis*. The texture and generosity of this lungwort's post-flowering foliage is a real bonus (fig. 3). By definition we grow hardy perennials and the persistent 'greenery' they provide when out of flower is what defines our overall style: they say that you can always tell a Hardy Planter's garden at first glance (fig. 4).

I also like plants that gild the lily (or should that be verdigris the lily?), with green flowers. One absolutely excelled in 2015: *Primula* 'Francisca' (fig. 5) started with typical primrose flowers and then, as an encore,



Fig. 5 *Primula* 'Francisca' is renowned for its prolonged flowering.

<sup>1</sup>Don Witton in his HPS booklet *Euphorbias* says 'It is smaller than and not as robust as the species...'

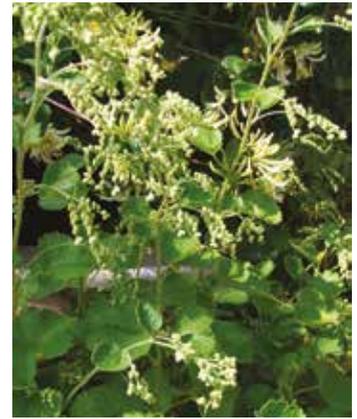
produced polyanthus-type flowers which persisted until well past the end of July. It was of, course, a long cool spring, and 'Francisca' is in a nice shady situation so the blooms were in no danger of getting hot and bothered. Another favourite is *Boykinia rotundifolia* (fig. 6). I have it by mistake, because a tiny seedling hitched a ride in a plant that I had ordered, and now it's planted in a prominent position where I see it every day and where it benefits from occasional damp spells from an adjacent overflowing water butt (fig. 7). I like it, not because it is flashy, or particularly rare, but because it pleases me with its arching stems of tiny pale-green bobbly flowers above rounded, jagged-edged leaves. The bees love it, and must surely be pleased that at least one Hardy Planter likes "greeny things".

When it comes to hard-to-come-by plants, I think many Hardy Planters will have more than a few. These plants weren't necessarily rare when we got them, but many of them have become rare because of passing time and changing fashion. We continue to grow them because we like them. For instance, I have an obstinate affection for *Tanacetum niveum* 'Jackpot' (fig. 8), a feverfew that is rather better than the average but for which few suppliers are listed in the *Plant Finder*. 'Jackpot' will grow nearly a metre tall, with quite woody stems and

leaves with a slightly silvery caste to them, and it will be covered with the cleanest, whitest, small daisies imaginable. My admiration for this plant is not, I think, shared by many. Perhaps I should set up a 'Jackpot' Facebook page and solicit lots of 'likes' for it.

Right at the start of my serious gardening, I bought *Primula* 'Lady Greer' (fig. 9) from the nursery then run by the well-known writer and broadcaster Nigel Colborn. I have it still, although every spring it nearly gives me heart failure by being very slow to wake up. It is now on the HPS list of Conservation Plants, which just goes to show what passing time can do to what is really a very hardy and persistent individual. A charming *P. juliae* relative, it has short, polyanthus stems with creamy yellow flowers ageing to a pink flush. It was bred by Mrs Johnson of Kinlough, Co Leitrim, one of several Irish lady amateur plant breeders of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. She was also responsible for the now quite rare *P.* 'Kinlough Beauty' and the better known *P.* 'Guinevere'.

Plant breeding of course requires patience and a certain obstinacy, a trait which is probably discernible in Hardy Planters as a breed. When experience tells us that a certain plant, or indeed a whole genus, is not really suitable for our gardens, we do not necessarily give up trying to grow it.



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Fig. 6 The understated but attractive green flowers of *Boykinia rotundifolia*.



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Fig. 7 It benefits from an adjacent, overflowing water butt.



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Fig. 8 I still think that *Tanacetum niveum* 'Jackpot', under-appreciated and misunderstood, has a lot to offer.



Fig. 9 *Primula* 'Lady Greer'.



Fig. 10 *Crocosmia* 'Severn Sunrise' with its gentle blend of pink and orange. is a favourite of mine.



Fig. 11 He pulled the communication cord so that he could get out and dig some up...

Optimism and stubbornness keep driving us to try again, and again... In my last article I bemoaned the fact that *Crocosmia* find my garden too dry, so it was a real joy to find C. 'Severn Sunrise' (fig. 10) putting on a wonderful show in August 2015 after a season that had been more to its liking.

I love the many forms of *Leucanthemum x superbum* and over the years have tried several, but they really struggle in parched conditions. This is galling, especially when, most summers, we drive round the Edinburgh by-pass on our way north, and on a particular stretch see the banks white with a most beautiful tall wild leucanthemum. I guess this is how Horace Read must have felt when, in the 1920s, he saw a similar sight on a railway journey, and pulled the communication cord so that he could get out and dig some up<sup>2</sup> (fig. 11). A double-flowered variant, it was to become the start of the well-

known strain of 'Esther Read Daisies'. I'm sure Horace would have been a member of the Society had it existed in his time.

So plant spotting, fuelled by an insatiable curiosity and love for plants, is something of which we certainly are guilty. I remember a rather long and hot coach journey being much enlivened<sup>3</sup> when Twink Addison and I spied a very handsome wild parsnip flowering just beside a busy roundabout in Norfolk (fig. 12). But surely, being excited by a wild parsnip, albeit green-flowered, is neither folly nor indeed a crime?

This kind of vigilance and interest in plants is, after all, what has brought us plantaholics all sorts of treasures over the years, including, for example, the many forms of the lesser celandine, *Ficaria verna* (known to most of us as *Ranunculus ficaria*). I am very fond of the double, bronze-backed variety called variously 'Bowles's Double', 'Picton's Double' and 'Double Bronze' (fig. 13). But, of course, you really do have to bend down to appreciate this one.

No need to do that with a plant I have grown for many years, from my early fascination with herbal plants. Elecampane (*Inula helenium*) is definitely statuesque, and at several of stages of its development impressive. Its emerging leaves are so full of energy that one gets quite tired

<sup>2</sup>This story is just one of the many lovely ones included in Alex Pankhurst's book *Who Does Your Garden Grow?*

<sup>3</sup>I was brought up on the I-Spy books, which may also account for this way of relieving the tedium of long journeys.



Fig. 12 We spied a very handsome wild parsnip.

looking at them, and as the 2m stems extend they are topped by the most beautiful sculptural buds (fig. 14) which eventually open to rather ragged yellow daisies (fig. 15). Perhaps the flowers are what even a Hardy Planter would call “coarse,” but they are so popular with bees that they can be forgiven (fig. 16). And who cares if it’s not in the top ten of favourite, flashy plants that dominate the average garden centre?

Another of my old favourites is the pink *Centaurea dealbata* (fig. 17). Often called ‘Whitewashed Cornflower’ because the back of every leaf is pure white, it produces a succession of pretty pink flowers which turn into intriguing seedheads. I could never understand why there was relatively little seed in them until one day I happened to see a charm of

goldfinches working their way over the whole plant, gobbling up the fat seeds obligingly offered by the up-turned spent flowers. I have attempted to grow various ‘better’ forms of pink, perennial cornflower in the past, but this one has been a reliable feature of my garden for more years than I can recall.

I think we’re quite sentimental and tend to hang on to old favourites, especially when they perform well in our gardens. We also like plants which have a story attached to them. I remember my mother once returning from a holiday during which she had visited Kiftsgate. In spite of having many years of gardening behind her, this was the first time she had seen *Lathyrus aureus* (fig. 18) with its intriguing orange flowers. (It was then called *Orobus aureus*).

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Fig. 13 This double, bronze-backed form of *Ficaria verna* is worth bending down for.



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Fig. 14 The sculptural buds of Elecampane, *Inula helenium*.



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Fig. 15 Bees show their appreciation of the ensuing yellow daisies.

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Fig. 16 Elecampane is so popular with bees.

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Fig. 17 Probably the easiest and most reliable of the pink perennial cornflowers, *Centaurea dealbata*.

Her excitement was palpable (fig. 19) and explains why I went on to grow this plant for myself. To say that we do not like colour is clearly nonsense (fig. 20); indeed, we tend to like 'painting' with our plants, and embrace as many contrasts, shades and subtleties as we can get our hands on (fig. 21).

The same compulsion means that we like to have a go at raising plants, and the more unusual they are the better. Fortunately we have access to the huge variety offered by the HPS Seed Distribution, which is where I found seed of *Sisyrinchium palmifolium* (fig. 22). I duly raised plants, and one is now in full view of the dining room window. Like many of this genus it looks scruffy after flowering, and I know it is the fact that it is not dead common that keeps it where it is. So I should perhaps submit a guilty plea; but the world of horticulture can be thankful for those of us who commit the crime of growing the

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Fig. 18 The subtle colouring of *Lathyrus aureus* is what makes us want to grow it.

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Fig. 19 Her excitement was palpable.

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Fig. 20 To say that we don't like colour is clearly nonsense.



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Fig. 21 In her garden in Harrogate, Pat Clark shows how to paint with plants.

uncommon, thereby helping to keep a wider range of plants going for posterity.

It was the texture of its leaves and the unusual flower colour of *Dicliptera sericea*<sup>4</sup> (fig. 23) that caught my attention many years ago on an HPS Summer Gardens Day; it is the excitement of finding something new, attractive and different that really characterizes us I am

sure. This isn't so that we can gloat over having something others do not have, but rather that we can feel the exhilaration of widening our plant horizons even further. So, yes, we like something unusual, but we don't restrict our interest to small, green things. And if you detect a slight note of defiance, I would certainly plead guilty to that (fig. 24)! 🌱



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Fig. 22 *Sisyrinchium palmifolium* probably does earn its keep because of its relative rarity.



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Fig. 23 Wonderful flower colour and leaf texture are combined in *Dicliptera sericea*.



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Fig. 24 If you detect a slight note of defiance...

**Judy Harry** is pleased and thankful to have been an HPS member since the 1980s. And as a past Chairman she sometimes feels the need to extol the many virtues of this wonderful Society.

<sup>4</sup>This is not bone hardy! Cut it hard back after flowering and keep it dry and frost-free over winter.