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Up close and personal

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Fig. 1 *Helenium* 'Sahin's Early Flowerer' – in my town garden I desire vibrant colour.

Moving gardens proved much harder than moving house. The garden was something we had made over twenty years. We had spent our weekends and holidays clearing brambles and nettles, digging in

trees, lining up hedges, arguing over sight-lines and occasionally relaxing. I comforted myself that the move to the small town garden would allow us more time together and more time to visit gardens.

I quickly discovered that gardening in a small space confers a relentless grip. I had been a relaxed sort of gardener. Our country garden was large enough to allow enclosures that died back as other areas came



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Fig. 2 In a small garden, everything is on show. *Rosa* 'Rève d'Or' flowers all year. A most accommodating plant.

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Fig. 3 Tulips remain a passion. *T. 'Jan Reus'* is a longstanding favourite.

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Fig. 4 *T. 'Greuze'*

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Fig. 5 *T. Ronaldo*.

into bloom; we had the absolute luxury of space. I had failed to anticipate that in a tiny garden everything is visible (fig. 1). As soon as you step outside you are confronted by plants long past their pristine best: bulb foliage yellowing, sedums flopping, roses requiring dead-heading, trees and shrubs outgrowing their allotted spot, bare patches requiring redress. A recalcitrant child demanding non-stop attention. This urban plot of later years is a time-consuming conundrum. I have the remedy in my hands. I could undertake a root and branch transformation, create a disciplined garden

of understated green forms: topiaried box and yew, trimmed *Phillyrea* and clipped *Ilex crenata*, *Santolina* shorn of its yellow buttons, such as one sees in garden design journals, planned for busy people who don't garden.

However it appears that the leap from rural to urban has engendered a new gardening persona: I have set aside discreet and tasteful. In the country garden we created the ubiquitous white parterre and a rose garden that eschewed the strident. In town, I now desire vibrant colour and would be bereft

without orange and episcopal purple, crimson dahlias and lime-green euphorbias. So the search for the year-round garden continues. I have not discovered the holy grail of gardening in a small space. There continue to be rest periods, as the acting euphemism goes. In the depths of a bleak East Anglian January the garden certainly lacks joie de vivre. My gardening metamorphosis means I need to cultivate this plot, up close and personal, for much of the time. The solutions are prosaic (and possibly inappropriate in a journal entitled *The Hardy Plant*).

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Fig. 6 *Sarcococca confusa*

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Fig. 7 The fruits of *Malus 'Evereste'*.

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Fig. 8 *Azara microphylla 'Variegata'*.

Bulbs (in the broadest sense) have become one solution, annuals the second, and pots have become an absolute staple of this later-life transformation. A clump of aconites and a bucket of snowdrops were the only plants that moved with us, recalling our first wintry sight of the rural garden with its sheets of *Galanthus nivalis* and luminous pools of *Eranthis hyemalis*. In their new urban home both have multiplied and lighten the city midwinter. I am no galanthophile: they are joined by two justifiably popular cultivars, elegant *G. 'Atkinsii'* and vigorous *G. 'S. Arnott'*. *Erythronium 'Pagoda'* reproduces amongst the ferns, *Anemone blanda* spreads under *Rosa banksiae 'Lutea'*, though *Uvularia grandiflora* sadly finds my soil too dry to be comfortable. *Narcissus 'Jenny'*, with swept-back lemon petals that gradually transmute to white, and *Narcissus 'W. P. Milner'*, an old-fashioned miniature, provide welcome splashes of light in the dour days of March. They are partnered by promiscuous oriental hellebore seedlings, reliable epimediums and pots of small-flowering tulips such as 'Little Beauty' which provide intense early colour in February and March. Refined *Iris 'Katharine Hodgkin'* (*Reticulata*), which rarely lasts more than one season, is another much-used pot-dweller. Last year, in a rush to complete a late order, I purchased a tulip called 'Pink Dwarf', foolishly assuming it would be miniature: it turned out to be stumpy,

the flower grossly oversized, and an effective lesson: check a plant in an independent source and do not rely on the catalogue description. On the other hand, *Helleborus 'Anna's Red'* (Rodney Davey Marbled Group) proved to be exquisite, with striking marbled foliage and luscious plum flowers, although sadly sterile. Alliums are relegated to the beds: stunning heads on elegant stems but leaves that require masking. Each year I experiment with a new cultivar but I rely on 'Purple Sensation' (despite the fact that its numerous progeny are pale imitations of its parent), plumptious *A. cristophii* and sparky *A. schubertii*. The seedheads in autumn are worth the investment.

Tulips continue an unabated passion (figs 3-5), but I now



Fig. 9 *Phuopsis stylosa* around the sundial.

plant them with a profligacy that defies the space at their disposal: burgundy *T. 'Jan Reus'* and vibrant orange 'Greetje Smit' frequent the quadrant beds. The terrace pots are crammed with a medley of purple, burgundy, ruby and



Fig.10 The Great Pot Transplantation.



Fig. 11 The pots are soon hidden.

crimson tulips which alter yearly: 'National Velvet', 'Ruby Prince', 'Havran' and 'Bloody Mary' are on trial this year. The indulgence of reds is highlighted by the contrasting 'Prinses Irene', soft tangerine flushed with streaks of purple. The tulips ignite April but by mid-May they are extinguished. I continue to grow lilies, despite the affection lily beetles have for this Norwich garden. As a result lilies are also confined to pots, where they can flourish for some years with regular feeding and the addition of new compost. *L. regale* is a must because of its scent and its grace; 'Night Flyer' is exquisite, deep claret but sadly without fragrance.

A scattering of winter shrubs clothe the walls, chosen mostly for perfume or light-reflecting qualities: *Lonicera fragrantissima* is sparse though fragrantly welcome; glossy-leaved *Sarcococca confusa* (fig. 6) forms a small hedge and shelters a stone boar which confronts the side-gate visitor, the white flowers producing elusive wafts of scent from November to April; *Euonymus fortunei* 'Emerald Gaiety' echoes the white trunk of the silver birch, and inherited *Mahonia x media*, possibly 'Charity', provides December clusters of yellow flowers below the tall, dark, topiaried *Viburnum tinus* which houses nests of blackbirds in spring. The succulent brick-



Fig. 12 *Ricinus* 'New Zealand Purple', a good foil for colourful bedding.



Fig. 13 *Eucomis bicolor*.

red fruits of crab apple *Malus* 'Evereste' glisten throughout the winter (fig. 7), until they are finally despatched by birds, and ivy sources food for early bees and beneficial insects. Just as the back-door pots begin to strut their stuff, *Azara microphylla* 'Variegata' (fig. 8) obligingly opens its inconspicuous but deliciously vanilla-scented yellow flowers and reminds you of its presence. The abundant, glossy-leaved, buff-flowered *Rosa* 'Rêve d'Or', which scrambles over the archway, flowers throughout the year; a most accommodating plant.

As with most gardens, late spring and early summer take care of themselves. Boundary roses dominate.

The brilliance of scarlet *Rosa* 'Scharlachtglut', the purity of the cream tea-rose 'Sombreuil', and sumptuousness of 'Souvenir de la Malmaison' are well worth their annual appearance. I learned long ago that my predilection for roses ranked me in the lowest ranks of gardeners. Earlier this year at a lecture day, I sat next to an enthusiastic and newly appointed head gardener at a grade II* listed garden I particularly admire. I asked if he had made any changes. 'Well', he said, 'some; but of course,' with a colluding wink, 'you must always cater to the rose brigade'. I confess I nodded sagely but felt like Judas. I am one of the Rose Brigade and this year 'Lady Hillingdon', a climber with whom I have long wished to be better acquainted, has been invited to join the throng. As the tulips die down in the beds, the chrome spurges continue to assert themselves, providing welcome structure amongst the soft new foliage. *Euphorbia mellifera* drifts honeyed fragrance towards *E. stygiana* on the opposite wall. Hardy geraniums and their erodium relatives, geums, and the crosswort *Phuopsis stylosa* (fig. 9) plump up, conveniently masking the allium leaves which shrivel as the umbels prepare to flower.

The lushness of late spring can be misleading: it is the busiest time of year in this plot. Propagating, potting on and weeding all give way to the Great Pot Transplantation (figs 10 & 11) and my third invaluable asset: annuals. I once dismissed annuals as municipal bedding but I no longer have

time for such elitism: tulips cede their place to a mixture of annual bedding, interplanted with reliable perennials: constants that I retain and divide from year to year such as dahlias, scented pelargoniums, and a recent discovery which I had wrongly assumed to be a solanum, *Lycianthes rantonnetii*, (and according to the RHS is hardy). I move them to the greenhouse in winter and in summer return them to two large underplanted pots, one each side of the terrace steps. Some, such as pelargoniums and argyranthemums, are grown from cuttings, some from seed include thunbergia, *Ipomoea lobata*, cosmos and ricinus (the purple-black *R. communis* 'New Zealand Purple' (fig. 12) is wonderfully exotic as a backdrop to the other bedding). The more mature incomers are common garden-centre stalwarts: verbena, heliotrope, nemesia and centradenia (which I swear is gastropod proof). Pots require sufficient size, and discipline in placing, in order to create an effect, so they are grouped in close companionship and provide an explosion of colour that can be glimpsed from the front door.

If May and June is generally a doddle for colour and luxuriance, July tends to be tricky in the borders which undergo their annual collapse at the close of June, before the late-flowering clematis and other climbers erupt into bloom and take over from the roses. Dahlias and salvias effect a partial regeneration, and one or two annuals, judiciously



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Crocosmia **Bressingham Beacon.**



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Dahlia 'Karma Choc'.



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Kniphofia 'Percy's Pride'.



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Telekia speciosa.



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The jarring zinnia.



Alliums in early summer.

placed, act as interim life-support before the crocosmias, kniphofias and heleniums fully assert themselves. Self-seeded nasturtiums are welcome to infiltrate, and last year I decided to substitute orange zinnias for the customary tithonias. The waxy perfection of a zinnia flower is breathtaking and I have used red, pink and purple zinnias for some years: this time I grew unashamedly orange, giant zinnias from seed and nurtured them through their childhood: I planted them out in full adulthood, with lower leaves removed to resist the slug-fest of the summer garden. The flowers glowed but their fluorescent colour proved less a contrast than a jarring note, which demonstrates that orange does not always mean orange! Worse still, the remaining leaves continued to be eaten.

I suspected vine-weevil until I discovered the culprits in full larder-grazing mode: two whippets zinnia snacking. Next year I intend to try the humble calendula as my orange accent, despite its culinary properties.

I found myself inadvertently employing a technique much used by Gertrude Jekyll: the placing of pots in borders. I had optimistically attempted to stage-manage the external redecoration of the house and the replacement of rotten wood in the greenhouse so that all garden work would be consecutive. Oh foolish gardener: you can never outwit a builder. Both the terrace and the greenhouse area required simultaneous evacuation: the beds were the one spot untouched by carpentry, paint-pots and

scaffolding. In some cases it proved a revelation: a dahlia I have maintained in a large pot for some years was insinuated alongside the 'Leverkusen' rose and they complemented each other; *Eucomis bicolor* (fig. 13) relished the contrast of friendly ferns. The scented pelargoniums flourished as their roots met the soil and the potted myrtle rejoiced in its new position. This year I intend to place greenhouse-grown lilies in the border, hoping to outwit the brilliant but deadly lily beetle.

Although I still yearn for more gardening space I am gradually learning to live with the limitations of my urban plot, although I find I am far less tolerant of plants that fail to perform. On occasions I have displayed a brutality that surprises me. Over the last year alone, an underperforming wisteria, a strawberry tree and the seed-grown tree peony have all been despatched. The four fastigate yews which marked the quadrant beds were also subject to summary execution; I confess I have some lingering regrets over them, but they will be replaced by sentinels which require rather less room and are more responsive to clipping. As with the Red Queen in *Alice*, a small garden has no place for sentiment. On the other hand, it does afford me the most intimate acquaintance with my plants. 🌿

Lesley Kant Cunneen and her husband Stephen live just outside the Norwich city walls, in a tall thin Victorian house with a back-garden which measures 90 x 27 feet. Lesley is a garden historian, currently undertaking research for a doctorate.