



© Alex Pankhurst

Fig. 1 A gardener needs steely determination to execute the death sentence on a poor doer. But *Sisyrinchium striatum* 'Aunt May' was performing poorly in the border, and has now gone.

I must have killed hundreds of garden plants over the last fifty years, maybe even thousands. Not intentionally. Well, with a few exceptions. But how many are the ways in which it happens.

A recent demise, the cause of everlasting regret, is of a plant brought back from an HPS coach trip to Ireland decades ago. At a garden called Beech Park we admired a member of the willowherb family, *Epilobium rosmarinifolium*, now *Chamaenerion dodonaei* (fig. 2). It should have been a rather loud pink, but this one was tastefully pale. A seedling that had occurred in the garden, apparently. And unlike *C. angustifolium*, its rampant rosebay cousin, this was said to be well behaved. Reticent might have been a better description, for back in my (much drier) East Anglian

garden it never spread or seeded, and sown seed didn't come true. I just enjoyed its elegant pale pink spires in late summer every year, always meaning to propagate it. Alas, that was something I didn't get round to. And then last spring, it failed to come up. Fool! An irreplaceable plant gone, maybe a loss to the whole gardening world, since it doesn't seem to be available commercially. Does anyone else grow *C. d.* 'Beech Park'?

'If you want to keep a plant, give it away', goes the saying. Very true. A favourite springtime flower, *Arabis alpina* subsp. *caucasica* 'Flore Pleno' (fig. 3) is generally a good doer, but a few years back I suddenly realised that in the border where it had been for ages, it no longer was. According to that year's *Plant Finder*, hardly anyone stocked it either. Curses. But an

How many ways to kill a plant?

Alex Pankhurst

acquaintance in the village to whom I'd given some plants happened to remark on 'that lovely white thing – like a miniature stock, so pretty'.



© Alex Pankhurst

Fig. 2 *Chamaenerion dodonaei* 'Beech Park'

She was happy for me to come and take some bits back. Situation, and plant, retrieved, and lessons learned – have a plant in at least two places in the garden, and take notice of old sayings.

Mind you, the opposite of that particular adage can be true – there’s danger in being too generous. In the 1980s, at the closing down sale of Ramparts, a local nursery run by a keen plantsman, I bought a small-flowered white clematis labelled *Clematis fargesii souliei* (fig. 4) (now *C. potaninii* var. *potaninii* – for heaven’s sake, can’t the taxonomists leave any name alone). The thing proved a delight in late summer, smothered in bloom as it climbed up a pear tree, beneath which I would later find self-sown seedlings. These were potted up and taken to HPS meetings and other plant stalls. But, you’ve guessed it, a few years later the parent plant succumbed to a particularly bad winter, and I’d kept no seedlings. Since then I’ve tried growing it from both commercial and HPS seed without success. I’ve bought *C. p.* var. *p.* from nurseries, but the resulting plants grow long and lanky and hardly flower at all (fig. 4 shows the only flower this year on quite a large specimen). It clearly isn’t the same plant, and perhaps the original was wrongly named, or a particularly floriferous strain. The loss continues to be mourned.

It’s a given that gardeners



Fig. 3 *Arabis alpina* subsp. *caucasica* ‘Flore Pleno’

should try to match the conditions a plant enjoys in the wild – acid or alkaline soil, sun or shade, damp earth or dry, and with so much information online, these days there’s no excuse for us not to check the area something comes from, and its natural habitat. And yet plants have minds of their own, don’t they. How often do we find a seedling has put itself in quite the ‘wrong’ place, and is inexplicably flourishing. We need to respect a plant’s choice, not try to correct it, as I did with a cherished *Saxifraga* ‘Flore Pleno’ (*granulata*) (fig. 5). The lovely double form of our native meadow saxifrage, bought from a Wiltshire nursery some thirty years ago, actually shouldn’t have grown in my garden at all. It had been put in what was then the dampest spot available, which dried out every June, but by that



Fig. 4 *Clematis potaninii* var. *potaninii*

time the plant had gone into summer dormancy. Although not flourishing, it just about managed, and I marvelled at the exquisite white flowers every spring. Two years ago, now possessing a pond whose edge was invitingly damp, it occurred to me that that would be a more congenial place for the saxifrage to live.



Fig. 5 *Saxifraga* 'Flore Pleno'
(*granulata*)

Did it appreciate my misplaced kindness? Nope. Swiftly departed this world. Well this garden anyway.

Aubrietas (fig. 6) are not favourite plants. Pure snobbery really, the colour is brash and they're everywhere in spring, draping walls and roadside gardens. Clearly not difficult to grow. Yet a friend has bought them repeatedly only to have every one die on him. I reckon it's because he buys them from garden centres and puts them straight into the ground. Inevitably a peat-based potting compost has been used, which once dried out is difficult to moisten, and in winter forms an acidic, claggy mass round the roots – just what aubrietas, and many other plants, abhor. So I would say that another way to kill a plant is simply not to get rid of the peaty compost it was bought in.

A more insidious dealer



Fig. 6 *Aubrieta* 'Dr Mules'

of death is shade. Gardens never stand still. Plants, trees and shrubs grow, and what was a sunny spot can too easily become shaded. Day lilies are tough customers, and once planted I generally leave them to their own devices, confident that they'll thrive without any help from me. Attention they may not need, but sunshine they definitely do. And this spring I finally thought to rescue what remained of a clump of *Hemerocallis* 'Double River Wye' (fig. 7) from beneath the densely spreading shade of a variegated euonymus. The day lily's rewarding response, in its new, sunny position, is a burst of grateful flowering, but the poor thing's plight should have been noticed earlier. We put in appealing little shrubs and all too often they grow into huge great things that change the conditions around them, without our really noticing.

Plants can be horrible to each other. They fight for light, territory and moisture. Every May a large clump of double Marsh Marigold, *Caltha palustris* 'Flore Pleno' (fig. 8), formed a wonderful sight at the pond edge, its thrilling golden flowers reflected in the still water. Regrettably that has to be the past tense. Foolishly I planted a *Physostegia virginiana* in a nearby bed, unaware of its aggressive behaviour, and the thing has spread into the invitingly damp soil by the pond (fig. 9). It totally overwhelmed the Marsh Marigold, which now hardly exists, and threatens to invade the whole of the water's edge. How to remove it is something that needs to be worked out, and may not even be possible. *Physostegia*'s nickname is Obedience Plant. The Assassin might be more apt.

We have no compunction about destroying such thugs. But those of us with small gardens, well even those with acres, can't grow all the things we like the sound of. So what happens to those plants we buy, grow for a season or two, and then realise we're not actually that keen on? Not many of us are steely enough to dig up such things and dump them. They're just, um, encouraged to die. My list is shamefully lengthy, and includes *Anthemis* 'Tetworth', a disappointing *Wisteria floribunda* 'Alba', and *Sisyrinchium striatum* 'Aunt May'. ("Writer admits to bringing about demise of tiresome aunt"). (Fig. 1)

A recent life and death lesson concerns shrub roses. I grow three of the lovely hybrid musks bred by the Rev. Joseph Pemberton in the 1920s, and always understood that they just needed a light prune, if any at all. The great rosarian Graham Stuart Thomas says so in his *Shrub Roses of Today*. But an old and much-loved 'Penelope' grew very woody, and died a few years ago. Just one of those things, I thought. Then last summer, one of two large 'Moonlight' roses did the same. Nearby storm damage meant that the remaining 'Moonlight' had to be cut back almost to the ground, and I feared for its life. But the fountain of vigorous, flowering growth in response has been an eye-opener (fig. 10). Next winter 'Felicia', a similarly aged hybrid musk rose, is in for some serious surgery.



©Alex Pankhurst

Fig. 7 *Hemerocallis* 'Double River Wye'



©Alex Pankhurst

Fig. 8 *Caltha palustris* 'Flore Pleno' before the takeover



©Alex Pankhurst

Fig. 9 *Physostegia virginiana* invaded the edge of the pond



Fig. 10 *Rosa* 'Moonlight' enjoying a new lease of life.

There are quick and easy ways to bring about the demise of plants. Neglect to water something newly planted, for instance. Or forget to turn on the greenhouse heating one freezing night, when it's nurturing all your 'just-in-case' cuttings. Yup, done those.

Slugs, rabbits, moles and pigeons are well-documented plant enemies. Just as deadly are workmen. I swear builders would rather tread on a plant than a path. They can't help it. It's an instinct they were born with. I had several



Fig. 11 *Fritillaria verticillata*

goes at growing foxtail lilies. Eremurus flourish in places like Afghanistan, so they should like my poor, dry soil. But they wouldn't do. And when I moaned, people said "Well they take a while to get established, you have to be patient". But they faded away, except for one, which I'd more or less forgotten about. And then one year this glorious flower appeared. Hoo-blooming-ray – it had settled down. I could look forward to spikes like this every June from now on. Unfortunately, that was the year we had to have

the chimney repointed, the builder trampled on the plant, and that was that.

There's another, sure-fire way to kill a prized plant. Like the *Fritillaria verticillata* (fig. 11) whose ravishing flowers gladdened my heart for about ten years. Show it to a knowledgeable visitor. "Oh", they say, in disbelieving tones, "I thought you could only grow that in acid soil". Or, "Of course that's not really hardy". You hurry them away, but too late. Your plant now knows what it's supposed to do.

And promptly does it. 🌸

Alex Pankhurst has battled with drought and gravel soil in her East Anglian garden for over four decades, learning lessons every year.