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## The learning curve

Val Bourne

Fig. 1 Filigree lace *Adiantum* foliage.

I'm often asked about what to grow in an east-facing position, or in full sun, and it's such a tough question because there are variations within each. The south-eastern corner of a south-facing bed, for instance, can get searing winds in spring, while the western corner is relatively kindly because it's likely to get mellow evening sunlight and catch every raindrop going. Both would be classed as facing south, yet in that position there are very different microclimates.

But the biggest conundrum is shade: it can be under or at the side of buildings, or under evergreen or deciduous trees. If the shade is the result of buildings or evergreens, which cast a denser shade, this can be very dry. Shade underneath deciduous trees is sunny in winter and early spring when woodlanders thrive, but by

midsummer it's deliciously cool and shady although some light may penetrate. I always start by sprinkling seeds of aquilegia and honesty to see whether and how they grow because seedlings gradually establish themselves, giving me a clearer idea of what the conditions are really like.

Gardeners often struggle with shade and leave it bare, but many plants are adapted to it and none are better than hardy ferns. These primitive plants evolved long before pollinators so they have no flowers. I grow a range and they offer me lots of leafy texture which is particularly welcome when the weather's hot.

Unfortunately shade is in short supply in my third of an acre because the garden faces south, though the shady areas stay relatively damp because spring water runs underneath. However, one south-eastern

corner is overshadowed by trees growing on the other side of the wall, so by mid-May the whole area is shady and cool. I increased the shade with a sheltered strip about 2m wide on my side of the wall using purple hazel (*Corylus avellana* 'Fuscorubra'), *Viburnum x bodnantense* 'Dawn', *Prunus* 'Kursar', *Prunus incisa* 'Kojo-no-mai' and several named witch hazels.

After almost twelve years it's super shady on the ground in summer, enabling me to grow hardy maidenhair ferns (*Adiantum*), delightfully lacy in form and many with black stems which contrast really well against the bright-green filigree foliage. Their name comes from the Greek *adiantos*, which means 'to shed water', because they have water-repellent foliage: after a shower of rain they hold raindrops galore.

I'm hoping that the Himalayan maidenhair, *Adiantum venustum*, will eventually creep along the border and invade the paving, but so far no sign. On the far side of the path is *Adiantum aleuticum* 'Imbricatum', just 20cm tall, and in really deep shade is 60cm-high *A. a.* 'Miss Sharples', with larger and paler fronds. Martin Rickard's excellent *The Plantfinder's Guide to Garden Ferns* says a Miss Sharples gave the plant to nurseryman Reginald Kaye, who duly popped in a label with her name, as a reminder. Spores were 'collected' (that must be code for 'swiped') by another nurseryman who assumed 'Miss Sharples' was a bona fide name and the name stuck.

Maidenhairs need shade and some moisture, so they are not for dry gardens or sunny spots. I mingle mine among a dainty, equally wiry-stemmed grass that's often used at Chelsea - a white form of the Siberian melic, *Melica uniflora* f. *albida*). It self-seeds gently and is the plant equivalent of confetti with its pale, rice-like awns forever on the move; it has the same beaded quality as Bowles's golden grass, *Milium effusum* 'Aureum', but is less of a nuisance. Gardeners are still suspicious of grasses, I know, but some make wonderful support acts and fillers.

Hart's tongue ferns, with long linear leaves, look resilient yet scorch easily in bright sun. The British and



Fig. 2 *Melica uniflora* f. *albida*, adiantums and hybrid hellebores

European native, *Asplenium scolopendrium*, is bolder and creates a real contrast. I've acquired a yellow form named 'Golden Queen' from Brian and Steph Ellis's Avondale Nursery on the edge of Coventry (www.avondale.co.uk). It came from Stancombe Park in Gloucestershire, a garden no longer open to the public. There's one snag with 'Golden Queen' – it goes green in deep shade, so must be grown in brighter shade.

The most handsome asplenium, is *A. scolopendrium* 'Crispum Bolton's Nobile', with leaves that can measure four inches across. Found on Warton Crag circa 1900 in North Lancashire, it's named after H. Bolton, the man who grew it first, although it's unclear whether he was the one who found it. It likes limier conditions and it takes time to get going.

I neaten maidenhair and hart's tongues ferns after the

winter has gone, and in hard winters they sometimes have to be cut down, but new fronds appear on both in April or May.

The area under the whitebeam is much drier and very shady in summer. The tree was already here when we moved in and covered in ivy at the base so lots of birds nest there. I might have taken it out but I felt nostalgic about it, because my area of the Cotswolds has several ancient Roman villa sites nearby and the Romans apparently planted whitebeams close to springs, though this one arrived in the 1970s. The only fern that does well here is the male fern, *Dryopteris filix-mas*, erect and mid-green. There are many named forms and all have good fronds right up to Christmas, but once the weather gets bleak they collapse. The best way is to cut them back to reveal the brown knuckles, which are a good feature in winter.



Fig. 3 Sporelings in my stone wall

The new fiddle-back fronds have perfect timing, unfurling just as the bluebells open.

'Cristata Martindale' is a favourite form, its fronds with crested tips. A member of the Martindale family gave me the plant; the original was collected by their antecedents in 1872, in the Lake District.

There's a dryopteris going about named 'Parsley', and the fact that it's so abundant in several countries probably indicates that it's being micro-propagated in great numbers. Like most things this is good news and bad news. It's good, because rare ferns become more available when micro-propped in growing medium under lights, so you can produce thousands especially from spores, but less so with

meristems (or growing tips). Micropropagation doesn't work for all plants and not all plants behave well. Ferns have a habit of going in as one thing and coming out as something quite different. 'Parsley' with its crinkled fronds was probably a surprise!

*Polystichum setiferum* 'Pulcherrimum Bevis', is a good example of the problem. A wonderfully refined fern with incredibly lacy fronds, it was found by Jon Bevis in 1876 when hedge-laying on a Devon bank. It's highly desirable and although in time the crown will divide, enabling some to be sold over the years, there were never enough. Traditionally raised

spores from the normally sterile 'Bevis' produced the similar *P. s.* 'Drueryi', a more feathery beauty named in 1900. However, when more 'Bevis' spores were raised in Holland, a finer lacy form was selected in 1987 and named Green Lace. By the mid-1990s Green Lace was quite widely available, but at that time I wasn't into ferns so I didn't buy it. And then it disappeared, because micropropagation often breaks down due to the lack of vigour of the mother plant or to contamination. It has been renamed *P. s.* 'Gracillimum', but it's as rare as hen's teeth.

*Polystichum* means many bristled and these ferns have rusty bristles and their fronds vary from almost moss-like to neatly pristine. Named forms of *P. setiferum*, commonly called the soft shield fern, generally make good winter features so they're left until early spring then given a clean-up before the s-shaped crossiers appear, and in cool springs they unwind very slowly. *Polystichums* prefer good drainage. My favourite is 'Ray Smith', because it produces slender fronds that splay from a shuttlecock middle. Found in 1986, it seems to be a new form.

With the cool green foliage of the ferns, a walk through the shady area in summer is the equivalent of cold elderflower cordial – refreshingly simple. 🌿