



©Andrew Lawes

Fig. 1 Despite the cold, despite the wet, despite the dryness in summer, let alone the shade and the needles from the cedar tree, this is what the plants have allowed me to produce in mid-winter.

Few of us have no challenging areas in our gardens, and it often takes several years of dedicated work to improve them. Because a lot of our efforts are trial and error, progress is so slow that we can focus on the problems and overlook the change. Eventually the area will have developed its own identity, in its own way – probably nothing like that which was originally planned!

I find plants amazing; it seems that no matter how cold, or how windy, or how wet the bombardment the plants in our gardens are subjected to, it does little to quell their growth, or even their flowering. Of course, my views are influenced by the fact that my garden is in Suffolk: we usually escape the most severe weather in the UK, though we have a goodly share of adverse conditions – often drought.

Making a garden look good throughout the year is always difficult, and I have an area which is particularly testing. It's shaded by a beautiful mature blue cedar and a phillyrea – the needles of the first and the tough, plastic-like leaves of the second really do nothing to revitalise the soil beneath. The ground is kept dry by the trees and shrubs, their foliage keeping everything but deluges from penetrating the earth, and even this moisture is sucked out by the two trees and the larger shrubs nearby – there is stiff competition!

Over many years I've thrown on all the soil from spent pots; I have added fresh garden compost and manure; and I've broken up the panned earth, which requires wielding a hammer and chisel. Steadily the structure of the soil has improved.

Winter tapestry

Andrew Lawes



©Andrew Lawes

Fig. 2 Self-seeded *Lamium maculatum* 'White Nancy'.



©Andrew Lawes

Fig. 3 Yellow Archangel, *Lamium galeobdolon*, looks as if its leaves have been splashed with mercury.



Fig. 4 *Cyclamen coum* gives a double whammy – flowers as well as beautifully marked leaves. The phillyrea had been pruned and the silvery leaves of a fallen twig looks good among them.



Fig. 5 *Cyclamen hederifolium* forms large clumps.



Fig. 6. Heucheras made a good show initially but took ages to recover from the winter.

I am not an avid waterer, and as soon as plants have become established I tend to let them fend for themselves and only leap in with the hose when they are drooping, but I have installed a soaker hose to use during particularly dry periods. I've chosen plants that should suit these conditions, and even in this unfriendly-to-plants zone I've adopted an attitude of sink or swim: the survivors have continued to thrive, and those that haven't have either been moved or left to dwindle and disappear.

Time has been crucial in developing this space – Rome certainly wasn't built in a day! I have (literally) chipped away at it over the years, with some successes and somewhat fewer failures until I learned to go with the flow.

Now, especially in winter when the variety of low-growing

plants can be seen more readily, the area has become a foliage tapestry; and it continues to develop (fig. 1). The plants have been in the driving seat of this organic process, saying either leave me or move me, making my role secondary to theirs. Not everyone either wishes or feels confident to garden in this way – I have arrived at it more by default than rigorous planning, although it takes strong motivation to sustain enthusiasm.

Many of us tend to focus on flowers – how their colours blend, how statuesque and imposing they are. The plants in this area are the opposite: short, ground-hugging, and not yet in flower. At this time of the year, their foliage – in shape, texture and colour – is at its best, and more satisfying as the plants spread and their leaves melded together.

The cornerstone of this planting, so to speak, is *Lamium maculatum* 'White Nancy' (fig. 2) – an understated plant if ever there was one. Its mottled foliage is pristine during the winter months – it forms a tight mat which only the direst, bleakest weather can sully. Creeping its way in an airier fashion is our native Yellow Archangel, *Lamium galeobdolon* (fig. 3), its leaves looking as if they have been splashed with mercury.

Variation in leaf colour makes *Cyclamen coum* (fig. 4) a good dual-purpose plant. Its seeds ping from beautiful spiral stems and often travel a surprising distance. I love discovering minuscule plantlets in the lawn: I dig them up carefully and plant them back in the flower bed, or tuck them between the slabs that make up the patio to a small summerhouse.

With its leaves like frog skin, *Cyclamen hederifolium* (fig. 5) doesn't seem as enthusiastic as *C. coum* in spreading itself about, rather it makes huge clumps which slowly expand each year.

Shade wouldn't be shade without epimediums, and once you have one and have marvelled at its shining young foliage and then its striking but dainty flowers, their magic will enchant you. The range of coloured flowers, simple or exotic-looking, will have you under their spell and you will be avidly collecting them, wooed by their glamorous names such as 'Wudang Star', 'Little Shrimp' or 'Golden Eagle', or by their common name of Bishop's Hat.

The common Stinking Hellebore, *Helleborus foetidus*, loves it here too. It balloons out as winter moves into spring, with bunches of greeny-white inflorescences and lustrous downward-pointing dark-coloured leaves. The leaves of *Libertia chinensis* Formosa Group are linear but some have a slight curve, providing a contrapuntal note to the assemblage.

Like many I am hooked on heucheras (fig. 6), except *H.* 'Lime Rickey', which my wife has banned as it looks so much like lettuce! However, the best laid plans and all that... in their first winter they were really knocked back and most in this area died or declined. But at the back of the house, with good shelter, I saw they were thriving. So that is now where I plant



Fig. 7 In a friend's garden, the dark, dense foliage emphasises depth and enhances its neighbours.

them, with greater success – though they grow so slowly it tests my patience.

I'm very fond of dark, dense-green foliage. I am lured to it just on its own, but when it's inter-planted, either as a spot plant or as part of the back to a border, the plants nearby are seen at their best. I remember reading Vita Sackville-West's comment on the power of dark foliage, but I was young and found it hard then to appreciate the attraction of the dull density of these shrubs – even after repeating the rhyme of my art teacher, whose tenet for a perfect painting was to incorporate colours that were 'dull, bright, dark,

light'. Now I'm older I'm no longer a grasping plantaholic, trying to fill every niche with brightly flowering herbaceous plants, rather a calm observer, more in harmony with his surroundings, I can appreciate the value of dark dense foliage (fig. 7).

Box, *Buxus sempervirens*, enjoys this neck of the woods; the variegated form really stands out against a backdrop of matt-textured bay. We recycle the box bushes: when a container-grown box starts to yellow – box can take only so much root-pruning and being restricted in pots – we plant it in the back of this border where it quickly revitalises, and dig up



Fig. 8 *Pittosporum tenuifolium* 'Tom Thumb' makes a dark statement.



Fig. 9 Tender young leaves of *Fatsia japonica* enjoy the shelter.

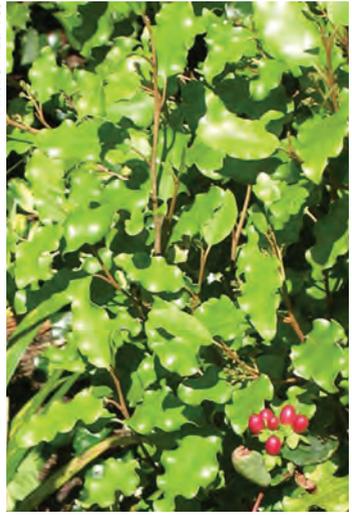


Fig.10 *Olearia paniculata*.

a rejuvenated specimen and pop it into the pot that's just been emptied.

Offsetting the small, rounded box leaves are the spear-shaped, heavily speckled leaves of Spotted Laurel, *Aucuba japonica*. Again, I think this is an underrated plant, possibly as it is so commonly seen as a demi-tree-like specimen at the back of overgrown gardens; however, when young and kept trimmed, it brightens up a dark and even dry space. As their foliage varies hugely you need to see what you're buying when choosing laurels, and pick only the well-marked ones.

Also lifting the tapestry from the horizontal to the perpendicular, purple

puckered-leaved *Pittosporum tenuifolium* 'Tom Thumb' (fig. 8), a rounded bold block of lustrous foliage, contrasts with the shiny broad leaves of *Fatsia japonica* (fig. 9) – the slightest breeze turns them into gently nodding fans, reminiscent of the massive ceiling fans operated by a punkahwallah in the days of the possibly not-so-glorious Raj.

The Tasmanian Daisy Bush – *Olearia paniculata* (fig. 10) – has lovely flexible stems, particularly at the growing tips, and the most alluringly wavy-edged light-green leaves – its crinkly foliage reminds me of some breakfast cereals. The shrub is hardy as long as it's in a sheltered spot with a light over-canopy just to cut the frost. I chose the wrong spot to

plant it and that first winter its three upright stems died back to ground level, so I thought that I had lost it. Then in spring it re-sprouted from the base, came back as a multi-stemmed specimen, and hasn't looked back since. I have moved it, pruned it, potted it and moved it again – each time it sulked for a bit and seemed to benefit from the removal of the slender, softer stem tips which had keeled over and started to shrivel – I just kept pouring buckets of water over it and it soon settled.

By March conditions have changed, narcissus are in flower and my winter tapestry has lost its impact. A new season is upon us as the plants grow upwards, many to produce flowers. 🌸

Andrew Lawes finds that as an editor (for the Norfolk and Suffolk Group) he needs 'thinking time' to clear his head – and a spell in the garden does this very well. It also makes him aware of how the plants are evolving in their surroundings, and he follows their lead.