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A moving experience

Judy Harry

Fig. 1 "One or two boxes of plants."

The popular view is that, after bereavement and divorce, a house move is the most stressful thing most of us are likely to experience. It seems that this may also apply to plants, since one of my hardy fuchsias within earshot of the remark 'It would be worth taking any hardy fuchsias we've got' may not have quite grasped the alternatives. Within a week or so it had clearly gone into terminal decline and was soon as dead as a bunch of sticks: it appeared to be saying

that it would rather die than be moved to new ground five hundred or so miles to the north.

For what was being planned was a move to the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. To make such a move is of course stressful for people and plants; after forty-five years of living in one house and one garden, plenty of hard choices and adjustments had to be made. My husband and I were not only 'downsizing' but

exchanging a slightly alkaline soil and dry climate for an acid soil and a climate notable for its wind and rain. The enterprise might have sounded foolhardy were it not for the fact that we knew the area well, having spent holidays there for decades, and now have a daughter living on Lewis, within sight of our new home. All those years ago I used to dream of what kind of gardening would be possible in such challenging conditions;



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Fig. 2 *Galanthus elwesii* 'Fred's Giant' should be happy moving back north.



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Fig. 3 *Galanthus elwesii* 'Comet' reminds me of a cartoon helicopter.



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Fig. 4 A respected Victorian Scottish Provost.

I am now in the happy position of being able to ask advice from my daughter, who has shown just what can be done at latitude 58° within sight and sound of the sea: it can be summed up as providing shelter from the wind, feeding the acid soil whose fertility is often depleted by rain, and recognising that the growing season is short.

But before reaching pastures new, there was a garden and several thousand plants to bid farewell. Of course, as a conscientious Hardy Planter I tried to do the responsible thing and spread some of the more unusual plants around among like-minded friends. But that still left a lot to choose from and like any plantaholic I suspected it would be necessary to inform the removal men that there might be “one or two” boxes of plants (fig. 1)...

Before moving day dawned in May 2017 I had

to watch the garden burgeon in what must have been one of the most glorious springs we had seen for some time. The quantity and quality of primulas led me to coin the collective noun an ‘exuberance’ of primulas, and I scurried round digging up many favourites including some of the random seedlings in an array of colours. Modern strains of primrose seem to exhibit an almost indecent tendency to procreate, so I am hoping that they will make merry even more enthusiastically in the soft western air (as I write they’re not looking very merry at all, but time will tell).

As well as primroses, spring bulbs do well on Lewis, and a selection of favourites was potted up in readiness. My daughter has found that snowdrops are slow to increase, but I was fairly confident that the early-flowering *Galanthus elwesii* ‘Fred’s Giant’ might welcome a return to the north

(fig. 2). It is named after Fred Sutherland, head gardener at Cruickshank Botanic Gardens in Aberdeen, who in the 1950s apparently found the original clump growing under a hedge and transplanted it to the Gardens, where it has thrived ever since. It is a marvellous snowdrop some 30cm tall, with broad grey leaves and the flowers with a pronounced ‘X’ mark on the inner petals. *G. e.* ‘Comet’ flowers even earlier (fig. 3). Another big chap, it was so named because the outspread petals looked like a comet, though to my eye it looks much more like a cartoon helicopter when fully outspread, but it is reliable and a good coloniser. Let’s hope that it too settles in.

To choose to take *Galantus plicatus* ‘Augustus’, named by Amy Doncaster after Edward Augustus Bowles, might have been foolhardy. *G. plicatus*

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Fig. 5 Did the strong scent of *Phuopsis stylosa* keep narcissus fly away?

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Fig. 6 *Narcissus* ‘Artist’ with its subtle water-colour orange wash.

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Fig. 7 *Narcissus* ‘White Lady’: an old but tough variety.

is native to deciduous woodland in Russia, Romania and north-west Turkey and one thing that is almost entirely absent from the north of the Isle of Lewis is woodland. However, as I have a particular affection for the green, folded back leaves with their paler central stripe, and go weak at the knees at the seersucker puckered, fat round flowers, I decided to take the risk. Another snowdrop connected for me now with Amy Doncaster is *Galanthus* 'S. Arnott'. In his very interesting recently published book *My Life with Plants*, Roy Lancaster tells the story of how, on a visit to Mrs Doncaster, he unwisely referred to this snowdrop as 'Sam Arnott'. This enraged the knowledgeable lady who pointed out that Mr. Arnott was 'a respected Victorian Scottish Provost', for whom such familiarity and informality would have been unthinkable (fig. 4). Due respect should obviously be



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Fig. 8 The main challenge is the wind.

shown to this variety and some propriety exhibited when attempting to catch a whiff of its sweet scent on still days.

Daffodils definitely appreciate the conditions on the island, but I was not sure of the wisdom of lifting them in May. However, I did lift (and share with a friend) a nice clump of *Narcissus* 'Cedric Morris', named after the renowned East Anglian artist and gardener and best known for its early flowering

season. In Lincolnshire I had it in flower as early as November, although December and January are the main flowering months and I suspect that being further north may affect its season. So you can imagine my delight at finding leaf and flower shoots cautiously emerging in early November in their new home. An unusual variety, it's said to be susceptible to narcissus fly though this hadn't been a problem with mine.



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Fig. 9 Red clover in a strongly coloured roadside patch



Fig. 10 *Hebe x franciscana* and montbretia, two naturalised invaders



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Fig. 11 A south-facing slope above our nearest port shows how happily *Gunnera tinctoria* will colonise.

Interestingly, I used to grow it near a clump of the pungently scented *Phuopsis stylosa* so this may have acted as a distracting deodorant (fig. 5).

Other daffodils have sentimental associations: *N. 'Artist'* was a gift from a 'serious' grower and shower, and as she also painted, it was entirely appropriate that it should have come from her (fig. 6). The flowers have a luminous water-colour wash of orange, quite unique in my experience. The website (<http://daffseek.org>) says this small-cupped variety was bred by Arthur E. Lowe from South Island, New Zealand, and was registered before 1927, which I suspect makes it quite a rarity.

Growing in the Lincolnshire garden when we arrived there forty-five years ago was a late-flowering small-cupped narcissus that so closely resembles *N. 'White Lady'* (this is not just my view) that it

seems reasonable to call it by that name (fig. 7). This would tie in with the date of the house, as this sweetly scented, delicate-looking variety was registered before 1897. Bred by Rev. George Herbert Engleheart, known as 'the daffodil maker', who bred more than 275 varieties, 'White Lady' is far from delicate, for it bulks up easily, producing masses of narrow, slightly twisted grey leaves as a preview to the lovely flowers. I had intended to encourage this tough character to settle in the far north, hoping that it would not notice the drop in the pH of the soil but sadly she was overlooked and literally missed the boat.

It was a great comfort to find a couple of clumps of daffodils bravely flowering in the neglected ground round our new house, where they had also suffered the indignity of having building rubbish dumped all around. Then I spotted a wonderful

bed of a very late-flowering 'Pheasant's Eye' narcissus in a local garden, and learned that our daughter also has a double, scented, very late-flowering narcissus given to her as 'Orkney Lily'.

Research continues, but lack of central colour puts some doubt on my first thought that it might be *N. poeticus* var. *recurvus plena*.

A summary of the weather at the northern tip of Lewis has already been given, but it is worth repeating that the main challenge is the wind (fig. 8). There are few days when there isn't at least a breeze, and winds of hurricane force are not unknown during the winter. As a result, gardeners here make the most of the weeks when summer flower colour is concentrated in a glorious kaleidoscope. The clarity of the air means that flower colours seem to be particularly clean and bright, making a wonderful contrast with the predominantly grassy landscape and vast skyscapes.



Fig. 12



Fig. 13 Some visitors to our 'garden'.

Wild flowers, of course, give a snapshot of conditions in any area. Red clover, whose flowers scent the air in summer, features prominently in the special conditions of the machair, areas of sand-blown wildflower turf of breathtaking beauty. Red clover also thrives on the roadsides where it flaunts flowers of the richest pinky red (fig. 9). Since our arrival, when gorse was in full bloom along with marsh marigold and lady's smock, we have been treated to the most wonderful unfolding of a succession of wild flowers in their very various preferred habitats. The peak was discovering that there were purple orchids on our land, one group having chosen to grow on an old ash tip. This may be the northern marsh orchid, but I have so much to learn about local orchids that I'll be kept busy for years.

Before starting a garden in any area, as well as 'reading' the natural flora, the wise gardener will of course take a good look at what is going on in gardens already. Windbreaks are prominent, and it was soon clear that the best displays are to be found where shelter is available. Willow, whose deciduous stems brave winter storms, has been used to provide both shelter and material for the weaving of creels in past generations, and shelter belts of *Salix viminalis* are common still. *S. alba* var. *vitellina* 'Britzensis' also does well. To this one can add deciduous

Rosa rugosa, which forms spreading thickets of pink and white, and a double purple-flowered form which might be *R. r.* 'Roseaie de l'Hay' – intriguing to speculate as to how it might have made its way to this Hebridean outpost. Evergreens of the salt-wind-resistant type are represented primarily by blue-purple-flowered *Hebe x franciscana* (fig. 10), which naturalises everywhere and flowers into the winter months; *Escallonia rubra* var. *macrantha* with its gummy scented foliage; and *Olearia macrodonta* which is occasionally seen growing to tree-like proportions, and having never rated *Olearia* before I can now see that it has charms when dressed overall with its daisies, even if they are not as white as white.

What soon becomes evident is that plants from the southern hemisphere find conditions here very much to their liking, and *Phormium* grows to a huge size with



Fig. 15 The pot of *Sternbergia lutea* came with us.

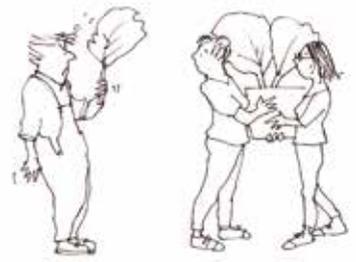


Fig. 14 "What's wrong with Lewis rhubarb?"

plentiful flowering stems. I won't be tempted to establish this in our new patch, for the prospect of having to curb its enthusiasm is more than I want to contemplate at my time of life. Another giant that is taking on almost legendary status is *Gunnera tinctoria*. In Harris, which shares the same island landmass as Lewis, there is now a campaign to eradicate this disproportionate intruder and it is making more frequent appearances here (fig. 11). For obvious reasons gardeners value this striking addition to their plant-lists and rejoice to see something growing so happily in these challenging conditions.



Fig. 16 And with it came two hitchhikers, *Corydalis cheilanthifolia* and *Euphorbia myrsinites*.

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Fig. 17 'Here lives a Hardy Planter.'

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Fig. 18 I hope to use boggy conditions to establish plants like *Lythrum salicaria* 'Blush'.

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Fig. 19 Lupins are popular as long as they have a little shelter, here in our daughter's garden.

However, the wind-borne up to 250,000 seeds per seedhead have no concept of garden boundaries, and grow anywhere with sufficient moisture, so many a drainage ditch now has a baby giant awaiting its time. Pampas grass has shown a similar disregard for borderlines and we've already had to dig up some strays.

The longest established intruder is montbretia, *Crocosmia x crocosmiiflora*, which forms huge clumps of foliage. One evening here we were enchanted (not having actually started gardening yet) to find eleven four-footed intruders in our 'garden', but this small herd of red deer seemed to find montbretia leaves unattractive (figs 12 & 13). Having wrongly supposed that leaves were all the plant produced, I was in due course quite won over by their prolonged display of bright orange flowers, which are sometimes to be found cheek by jowl with a naturalised mauve Michaelmas daisy, a lovely combination.

So, what do we intend to do with the ground surrounding our little house? Establishing a vegetable garden is a priority, and this is where our daughter's experience will be of great value. A large pot of a favourite rhubarb came with us, much to the indignation of one of our removal men who couldn't see what was wrong with Lewis rhubarb (fig. 14). Other plants in pots, plus some unintended hitchhikers, include *Schizostylis*,

known to do well here and it has indeed flowered and withstood the wind, and *Sternbergia lutea* (fig. 15) a gift from a gardener in Northern Ireland. Also from Northern Ireland came *Euonymus fortunei* 'Kewensis', a comparative rarity for which I have an unaccountable affection. Soon after our arrival this low-growing evergreen was planted with tough *Luzula sylvatica* 'Tatra Gold' in a container beside the north-facing door – as much as anything a proclamation that 'Here lives a Hardy Planter!' (fig. 17). They certainly will have to be tough: salt-laden winds are common throughout the year, and their leaves took on a bronze hue after one particularly vigorous storm.

To the south of the house, we intend to let mown grass merge into what is the natural landscape, which I hope to 'enhance' with naturalised plantings suited to the sometimes-boggy conditions. I'm mindful of the Gunnera effect, and just hope that *Iris x robusta* 'Gerald Darby' along with Himalayan primulas, Ragged Robin, *Lythrum* (fig. 18), *Caltha palustris* and other moisture-lovers will know their place. *Lysimachia punctata* of gardens with its cheerful yellow flowers has naturalised like a weed in the area, but I feel inclined to

include it nevertheless for its stems turn a magnificent rusty red in the autumn.

Elsewhere, the plan at the moment is to have a modest amount of 'flower garden', once some windbreak is established for its comfort. In addition to the spring bulbs and primroses I will concentrate on summer-flowering perennials which I hope will flaunt their bright colours in a rush. May, June, and July blooms all merge rapidly into a breathless display before the onset of more windy autumn conditions that can start as early as August. In this concentrated time-frame, a cottagey disregard for 'colour planning' is probably sensible. In any case, *Alchemilla mollis* and hostas (preferably slug-resistant varieties) do so well here that they can always be used as a colour break if one's susceptibilities are challenged. Having gardened for more years than I care to admit, it is really exciting to find that plants I've never been able to grow successfully before flourish here: *Sidalcea* and *lupins* (fig. 19), for example, and, absurdly, *Campanula glomerata* have been denied me in the past and are now top of my list. My policy will be to follow the advice



Fig. 20 "Bung it in and see what happens!"

I've always given to novice gardeners: "Just bung it in and see what happens" (fig. 20). To the perennials can be added annuals, and brightly coloured lilies, much loved in these parts for providing extra summer colour. I begin to see that this new garden adventure will have a distinctly juvenile and unsophisticated character. Red wellies and a child-sized watering can should complete the picture nicely. 🌸



Judy Harry will be taking her time to establish a garden in the Outer Hebrides, relishing a retirement challenge.