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Fig. 1 *Correa* 'Marian's Marvel'

A garden in east Kent

Jeremy Spon

Right plant, right place' might have become a cliché, but that doesn't mean the principle it summarises is any less valid. To grow a particular plant well, you need to understand the conditions it needs and as far as possible provide them. How easy this is will depend on the plant and where you want to grow it. If the two are unsuited, a lot of effort may be required to overcome the mismatch – and, having a large garden and limited resources, I long ago recognised that trying to grow lots of unsuitable plants would be unsustainable. In particular, extensive or regular watering is something I am reluctant to do, not least because water is an increasingly scarce resource in the South East of England!

So what conditions do we have to work with? The number one factor is soil

moisture, or rather the lack of it. Our soil comprises a relatively thin layer of clay with flints over chalk. This, combined with east Kent's irregular rainfall and low annual totals of rain, means that plants have to be able to withstand periods of very low moisture in the ground, and low air humidity as well. Average annual rainfall is under 700mm, and in some years the total has been less than 600mm. Prolonged spells without rain are common in the summer: typical were July and August 2016 with only 34.5mm in 62 days, and all but 8 days dry.

The other major factor, of course, is temperature. In this respect our location is more helpful, as we're relatively close to the sea in three directions – 8, 14 and 13 miles to the north, east and south respectively – so there's a distinct maritime influence.



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Fig. 2 *Aster ageratoides*



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Fig. 3 *Genista aetnensis*

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Fig. 4 *Cistus x dansereaui*
'Jenkyn Place'

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Fig. 5 *Acanthus hirsutus*

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Fig. 6 *Berkheya purpurea*

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Fig. 7 *Papaver atlanticum*
'Flore Pleno'

In most winters the temperature doesn't drop below 7°C, and prolonged cold spells are rare. February 2012 saw a run of 11 hard night frosts, the coldest registering -10.8°C, and daytime temperatures barely getting above freezing, which did considerable damage to more tender shrubs, but since we moved here in 1999 the winters have generally been short and the growing season long. As the garden slopes gently to the east, cold air tends to drain away, and we are well sheltered from the north by tall trees in our neighbour's garden. This relative mildness has encouraged my interest in plants from Mediterranean regions and Australasia.

When we moved here there was a framework of hedges in the garden

and a number of specimen trees. Some of the hedges, planted as shelter for what had once been orchards, and consisting of Italian alders (*Alnus cordata*), had been allowed to grow away into tall trees, and as anyone who has tried to garden under them will know, they have very greedy roots, close to the surface. The other hedges, of *x Cuprocyparis leylandii* and *Prunus laurocerasus*, also make adjacent areas even drier than they would have been. So, in addition to the limited rainfall, competition from tree roots means that many parts of the garden can be extremely dry in summer: testing conditions for many staples of the herbaceous and shrub borders.

Given our chalk substrate, it is no surprise that the soil is generally neutral to slightly alkaline, and of course this is a further limiting factor, although the pH values are generally not so high as to produce severe chlorosis in plants traditionally associated with acid soils, such as rhododendrons and camellias, or to preclude the growing of plants from Australia and South Africa.

So, after all that preamble, what does grow well here, and what does not? It is a given that any plant has to be reasonably drought-tolerant. There is little to enjoy in the sight of wilting leaves, let alone things shrivelling up and dying.

In spring, many plants adapted to woodland conditions are quite happy, as they make their growth and flower before deciduous trees leaf up and start sucking large amounts of moisture out of the ground. So we do well with hellebores and winter aconites (*Eranthis hyemalis*), Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum* species and hybrids) and snowdrops.

Conversely, when the autumn comes, lower temperatures allow the later-flowering asters to shine even when it is dry. There are too many of them to list, but I would single out, as it is relatively rarely seen, *Aster ageratoides* (fig. 2) which has several colour forms and is an excellent front-of-border plant. The true aconites, species and varieties of *Aconitum*, also flower reliably even when the

summer's been very dry and, last but not least, grasses such as *Molinia* and *Miscanthus* continue making a huge contribution to the picture with their flowers.

Plants used in the wild to a continuous supply of moisture through the summer are less satisfactory. Crocosmias we have largely given up on, as only 'Lucifer' flowers at all satisfactorily; *Phlox paniculata* cultivars need the dampest position we can give them if they are to look vaguely acceptable when they come into flower; *Lysimachia ciliata* 'Firecracker', a very invasive plant in some gardens, struggles to survive at all in a dry summer; and *Veronicastrum virginicum* often succumbs to drought before it has managed to flower. Sanguisorbas, whose graceful habit I

much admire, are equally hopeless, and I long ago abandoned all thought of getting the benefit of the wonderful foliage of ligularias or rodgersias.

So it will come as no surprise to learn that it is the plants from dry habitats that do best. A star of mid-summer is *Genista aetnensis* (fig. 3), which has made a fine small tree; nearby, the striking *Cistus x dansereaui* 'Jenkyn Place' (fig. 4) still has a few flowers open as I write in December, having started flowering in May. *Asphodeline lutea* does well, *A. liburnica* even better, especially when its mass of fine grey-green leaves is sprinkled with raindrops after a shower. Two slightly different morinas, one definitely *M. longifolia*, the other acquired as *M. persica* although it is hard to be sure this is the correct name, associate



Fig. 8 *Digitalis stewartii*

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Fig. 9 *Crambe maritima*

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well with grasses such as *Eragrostis curvula* and *Stipa tenuissima*, and these all self-seed mildly. Another two plants with thistle-like leaves are *Acanthus hirsutus* (fig. 5) with its muted yellowish-green flower spikes, and *Berkheya purpurea* (fig. 6). The berkheya has a tendency to pop up a foot or two away from where it was the previous year, and sometimes is so late appearing that it fails to flower, which is frustrating; far more vigorous so far is its yellow-flowered cousin *B. multijuga*, though it has not been tested by a severe winter.

Bearded irises are predictably happy, although difficult to associate with other plants as they flower poorly, if at all, if over-shadowed. Salvias both woody and herbaceous are real stalwarts; the woody species and varieties have

very long flowering seasons and so do herbaceous salvias, which can almost be too successful here. *S. amplexicaulis* and *S. verticillata* (and its varieties such as 'Purple Rain') have coloured bracts which mean that their flowers spikes remain attractive long after the petals have fallen. The flowers are also a wonderful source of nectar for bees, so their tendency to self-sow rather too enthusiastically is easy to forgive. Two other self-sowing plants which are also welcome to put themselves where they want are beautiful orange *Papaver atlanticum* 'Flore Pleno' (fig. 7) and tall rusty-coloured *Digitalis stewartii* (fig. 8).

Sedums (now *Hylotelephium*) in general are very drought-tolerant, and the modern selections of *S. telephium* such as

'Matrona', 'Xenox', 'Purple Emperor' and 'Red Cauli' are excellent contrasts to the paler leaves and flowers of varieties of *S. spectabile* like 'Iceberg', 'Stardust' and 'Brilliant'. Dwarf varieties like 'Vera Jameson' blend well with sempervivums in one of our gravel beds, where for many years we've also grown *Crambe maritima* (fig. 9); the original crambes featured on the 2004 HPS Chelsea stand, staged by the Kent Group, and planted out on return from the show they have thrived, regularly self-seeding. The crambe, of course, has wonderful glaucous leaves, but it's also worth growing for the honey scent of its flowers.

So far, so predictable. But there are quite a few plants which perform surprisingly well in conditions that might be expected to be unsuitable.

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Fig. 10 *Callistemon viridiflorus*

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Fig. 11 *Callistemon subulatus*

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Fig. 12 *Magnolia* 'Heaven Scent'

Soils in Australia are generally acid (and low in nutrients) but I am fascinated by the plants from that country and have tried many in the ground, and usually failures have been caused by low winter temperatures rather than alkalinity. (Although in some cases, unpredictably, drought is an issue, many acacias for instance being very sensitive to lack of moisture at the root in summer.) But the narrower-leaved species of *Callistemon*, *C. viridiflorus* (fig. 10) with yellowish-green flowers and *C. subulatus* (fig. 11) with brilliant red flowers, have made substantial bushes, and I may come to regret some of the *Eucalyptus* I have planted, such as *E. urnigera* and *E. dalrympleana*, which have made huge trees in only a few years. *Correas* have a reputation for tenderness but, in our garden at least,

a number are hardy in most winters; while their flowers would perhaps be overlooked among the riches of high summer, in winter they are a delightful surprise.

C. 'Marian's Marvel' (fig. 1) is undoubtedly one of the hardiest, but *C. reflexa* var. *nummulariifolia*, an almost prostrate shrub with pale yellow flowers, seems equally tough.

Rather surprisingly, I've found that many shrubs from New Zealand are more drought-tolerant than those from Australia. *Olearia*, *Carmichaelia*, *Pittosporum* and *Hoheria* have all done well, and all in their different ways have attractive or interesting foliage. The many forms of *Pittosporum tenuifolium*, in particular, will grow quite happily, if a little less vigorously, right at the base of large eucalyptus, and those with white or yellow variegation, such as 'Elizabeth', 'Silver Queen'

and 'Abbotsbury Gold' (there are many others) really lighten shady areas of the garden.

Many viburnums thrive; *V. cylindricum*, which might be expected to struggle given its large, rather soft leaves, has proved to be remarkably resilient and indeed vigorous – I think it has ambitions to be a tree rather than a shrub. As for flowering trees, *Magnolia 'Heaven Scent'* (fig. 12) is a real star, not at all troubled by alkalinity or drought.

When it comes to herbaceous plants, it is good to find ones that provide a generous green contrast to the many grey, silver or narrow-leaved plants that do so well in dry conditions. Two inulas, *I. hookeri* (fig. 13) and *I. racemosa* (fig. 14), never wilt, and attract many butterflies, while another 'daisy', *Silphium perfoliatum* (fig. 15), looks fresh and green right into autumn.



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Fig. 13 *Inula hookeri*

Fig. 14 *Inula racemosa*

Fig. 15 *Silphium perfoliatum*



Fig. 16 *Persicaria polymorpha*

The genus *Persicaria* contains several useful plants, including the delightful miniature carpeter *P. vacciniifolia*, and a really dramatic feature of our main herbaceous border right through the summer, *P. polymorpha* (fig. 16). This is not, perhaps, a plant for the very small garden: even in very dry summers it grows to well over seven feet, but its great virtue, apart from lush foliage in the first part of the summer, is the long season of interest of its flowers. Emerging white, in great frothing

spikes, they gradually fade to pink, and then a fetching brown, so that they still look good as a backdrop to autumn-flowering plants like asters and *Helianthus*. Very useful too are the forms of *P. amplexicaulis*. The old variety 'Firetail' is still good although there are several newer ones to choose from in varying shades of red, but my favourite has to be the form 'Rosea'. This is completely unfazed growing in part shade a few feet from the base of a very substantial leylandii hedge, even after

a month without rain in high summer. Nearby, several varieties of toad lilies, *Tricyrtis* species, flower profusely in late summer without any additional watering even though, like *Iris sibirica*, they look as if they should be growing in very damp soil.

So, as is surely true in almost every garden, we've found plants that thrive despite the challenges of soil and climate, and there are more than enough of them to stop us regretting those that cannot be grown here. 🌸

Jeremy Spon has enjoyed learning about and growing a wide range of plants ever since developing the classic teenage fascination with cacti over forty years ago.