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Fig 1 *Rhododendron* 'Olive' at the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens

2017 will go down in our family history as one of the most eventful and exhausting years. Promotional activities connected with my new book, along with family breaks and other trips, found me regularly on the road. Early November saw Sue and I celebrating our Ruby Wedding with a much-needed break in Madeira, of which more later, and we hadn't been home long before our next celebration, my 80th birthday, with a party for gardening friends organised by Sue at the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens. With no time to recover we became totally involved in making arrangements for a family Christmas at home. Normally that would have been the end of our year but no, on 29th December I found myself walking our daughter Holly down the aisle for her marriage to Dan. I had spent the previous day helping to decorate a tithe barn for

the wedding reception, having raided the gardens of several friends for decorative evergreens.

Among the many evergreens I grow, there is one near our entrance which, especially in the dead of winter, never fails to attract comment from visitors. *Chamaerops humilis* 'Vulcano' (fig. 2) is a distinct, compact form of the European mainland's only native palm species. The dwarf fan palm is a common sight along the Mediterranean coast. I also grow the typical plant nearby and, though the same age, it is 5 times as big, with larger leaves on longer stalks, and last summer it even produced its first flowers. 'Vulcano', meanwhile, with its tighter crown of shorter-stalked, stubbier leaves, is perfectly suited to a smaller space, a container even, and appears to be thoroughly at home in the free-draining, acidic sand of my front

President's perspective – plants, people, places

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Fig. 2 *Chamaerops humilis* 'Vulcano'



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Fig. 3 *Mahonia* 'Silverback'



Figs 4 & 5 *Hackonechloa macra*
'Aureola'



Fig. 6 *Ajuga incisa* 'Blue Enigma'

garden where it also enjoys whatever sun is available. Apparently it was originally discovered by a nurseryman growing on the slopes of Mt. Etna in Sicily. From the little I have seen of it in cultivation, it appears to be variable in vigour and in leaf colour, some more glaucous, almost silvery beneath when young.

As I mentioned it last year I thought I had better include here an image of winter-flowering *Mahonia* 'Silverback' (fig. 3) which is once again dominating my rear garden with its rich yellow flower spikes, though one has to turn over a leaf to enjoy its silvery-white reverse, a tricky job given its fierce, spiny teeth. It isn't available in the trade but a sister seedling, differing in its longer, more arching if not drooping flower spikes, was auctioned at a winter meeting of the HPS Hampshire Group. It had been purchased from a nurseryman near Newbury who has christened it 'Stickleback'. Both are to be included in a future RHS *Mahonia* trial.

Despite the understandable concern regarding *Rhododendron ponticum* (now *R. x superponticum*) and its smothering, all-consuming spread in many areas of the UK and Ireland we should not be persuaded into believing that **all** rhododendrons are *persona non grata* in our gardens.

By far the majority are well worth considering for planting in a suitable (acidic) soil, especially as a single specimen. For the smaller garden I can recommend the hardy hybrid 'Olive' (fig. 1), an upright shrub to around 140–80cm, freely producing its attractive clusters of funnel-shaped, mauve-pink flowers, defying the winter blues and providing a striking companion to snowdrops and other early bloomers in February.

Back to early March, when Sue and I spent a long weekend with friends on the Pembroke coast. Here, among other pleasures, we were thrilled to find a host of coastal native plants including sea beet, sea stock, sea spurge, sea milkwort, sea radish, wild cabbage, Danish scurvy grass and tree mallow. I had hoped to find the true Tenby daffodil (*Narcissus obvallaris*) but those many daffs we saw on roadside banks appeared to be planted hybrids of varied origin, colourful but not the real McCoy. On our penultimate day we braved a wet coast and woodland walk to find wild garlic, golden saxifrage and my favourite spring wildling, *Adoxa moschatellina*, moschatel or 'town-hall clock' as we called it in Lancashire, and duly celebrated in a local pub with sausages and mash followed by milk chocolate bread and butter pudding with hot custard – bliss!

A long-time perennial favourite of mine is *Hackonechloa macra* 'Aureola' (figs 4 & 5), a native woodland grass of N E Asia whose low clumps of slender shoots produce, in time, patches of shining rich green foliage to provide a most reliable and attractive ground-cover, especially in shade. There are several variegated selections of which 'Aureola' is the one I chose several years ago to plant in my own garden around the base of a tree magnolia, *M. cylindrica*. I originally saw it used this way at Knoll Gardens near Wimborne in Dorset and I have never once regretted copying the idea. The soft summer-long waves of gold-striped foliage is a perfect foil for the grey magnolia bark and best of all in the winter, when the leaves have faded to an attractive pale straw colour, it slowly develops a warmer tint reflecting the orange algae on the magnolia's trunk. In late January on a wet overcast day the combination really lifts my spirits.

Close by, in a shady border, I have planted *Ajuga incisa* 'Blue Enigma' (fig. 6), an herbaceous, low-growing perennial with jaggedly toothed leaves and bold racemes of rich-blue flowers in April. Many years ago, I first saw this species pictured in an illustrated account of Japanese native plants and I asked my

Japanese friend Mikinori Ogisu to source it for me. I passed on seed to a nurseryman friend who subsequently bulked it up and named it, though I was unaware of this until some years later. I never did understand the choice of cultivar name as its origin and ornamental quality were never in doubt.

I had an unexpected surprise towards the end of April when I was asked to identify an orchid in a Hampshire woodland. My curiosity piqued, I visited the wood and was astonished to see large drifts of the early purple orchid (*Orchis mascula*) growing with bluebells and other woodlanders such as wood sedge (*Carex sylvatica*), wood sanicle (*Sanicula vulgaris*) and wood pimpernel (*Lysimachia nemorum*). The orchid flower-spikes varied in colour from rich purple to pale rose and an occasional pure white. I spent several minutes picking my way carefully through the wood before settling down on a log, the better to contemplate the scene. Not a sound could I hear except for a blackbird's song, and having 'recharged my emotional batteries' I quietly departed.

When I first worked for Hilliers in the early 1960s, I met with a huge range of shrubs new to me including *Dipelta floribunda* (fig. 7), a 3m specimen of which grew



Fig. 7 *Dipelta floribunda*, Bowood House



Fig. 8 *Clematis flammula*, Hergest Croft

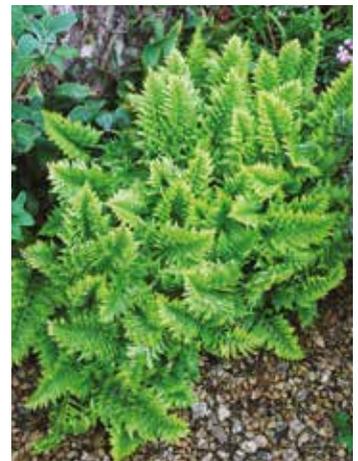


Fig. 9 *Polypodium australe* 'Cambicum Wilharris', Perrot's Brook



Fig. 10 *Galactites tomentosa*,
Perrot's Brook



Fig. 11 *Tibouchina heteromalla*,
the Blandy Garden, Madeira



Fig. 12 *Dahlia imperialis*, the
Blandy Garden, Madeira

by the main drive in their West Hill (Winchester) Nursery. I was immediately impressed with its stature and its generous clusters of pink flowers, but disappointed to learn that as it is difficult to propagate it was rarely available for sale. I was reminded of this in May when visiting the walled garden at Bowood House, home of Lord and Lady Lansdowne at Calne, Wiltshire, where I found a group of three *Dipelta floribunda* in full flower in a border, a splendid sight to behold. It is a hardy and easily grown deciduous Chinese shrub for most any soil in sun and belongs to the same family (*Caprifoliaceae*) as *Weigela*.

Another plant I had not seen in a long time, *Clematis flammula* (fig. 8), I came across in September covering a wall in the kitchen garden at Hergest Croft above Kington in Herefordshire. I once saw this vigorous scrambler tumbling from the towering rocks and cliffs of Meteora in Greece and have never forgotten its billowing panicles of small, white, sweetly-scented flowers. Cultivated in England since the late 16th century, it performs best in a warm, sunny situation on a large wall or fence.

Next day I visited John and Lyn Sales' garden at Perrot's Brook, Cirencester, known for its sumptuous displays of

snowdrops in late winter. As befits the garden of a former Gardens Adviser to the National Trust, it contains a wide range of plants, perennials and woodies. Since retirement John has developed a real plantsman's garden in which his broader skills as a designer are immediately apparent. Two perennials particularly caught my eye: a fern, *Polypodium australe* 'Cambrium Wilharris' (fig. 9), which planted at the foot of the house wall had developed into a lush colony of deeply lobed wintergreen fronds the colour of a 'Granny Smith'; and in complete contrast, on a sunny raised bed behind the house I spied a familiar Mediterranean thistle *Galactites tomentosa* (fig. 10) whose grey-green, hairy, spine-toothed leaves, particularly those on non-flowering rosettes, are notable for their attractive white venation. Their lax clusters of rose-purple or lilac flower-heads are borne over an extended period from summer into autumn on cobwebby hairy stems to 1m. Like many thistles and thistle relatives it can form colonies in time, but the seedlings can be removed and potted on when small, before their tap root takes a hold.

Saturday 16th September was a special day when Sue and I travelled north to Ness Gardens on the Wirral to join old friends

and former colleagues at a garden party celebrating the 70th anniversary of Gardener's Question Time. A programme of entertainment was provided, including question-time sessions and plant sales. Apparently 2500 people attended including the 950 packed into the main marquee for the opening GQT session. Needless to say we had a lot of fun shared with garden lovers countrywide

One of the most spectacular plants new to me in 2017 was *Senecio candidus*, a bold, low-growing evergreen perennial from Tierra del Fuego and the Falkland Isles. The entire plant, including the large leaves, is covered in a white felt while the yellow daisy flowers, although attractive, play a lesser role. Several groups of this plant have been planted in the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens and are proving an instant attraction and talking point. It's still early days but I believe it will need protection, as it doesn't appear to like cold, wet winters. Neither do I.

Having addressed in my Spring 2017 article the case of the wrong sea stock, *Matthiola incana* white form, I would like to bring readers up to date with news that a good friend gave me seed of the true Madeiran Stock, *Matthiola maderensis*, from a wild collection and from that seed I now have

three young plants in my garden, with another one in a pot under glass as a back-up. Mention of Madeira also provides me with a colourful end to the present article. Those who have visited the well-named 'Garden Island' will need no reminding, but for those who haven't, let me offer you a brief account as to why I believe Madeira to be the perfect antidote to winter blues, especially if you are a gardener.

Sue and I have hosted a number of enjoyable and successful garden tours on Madeira, all between March and May, so it was no surprise that when we discussed a short break to celebrate 40 years of marriage we both came up with the same answer. Six days in early November would guarantee plenty of interest and colour and so it proved. Of the many gardens we have visited in the past there was only time to visit a handful. The Quinta do Palheiro is a favourite with visitors who refer to it as The Blandy Garden. Like many of the larger, older gardens it contains a large variety of plants from woodies to perennials including bulbs in season. On the day of our visit I was particularly attracted to *Tibouchina heteromalla* (fig. 11) from Brazil, a large, tender shrub with beautifully veined and felted leaves, and flowers of a royal purple.



Fig. 13 *Tithonia diversifolia*, the Blandy Garden, Madeira



Fig. 14 *Megaskepasma erythroclamyx*, Quinta do Lago, Madeira



Fig. 15 *Bauhinia galpinii*, Quinta do Lago, Madeira

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Figs 16 & 17 *Aristolochia gigantea* & *Farfugium japonicum*, Quinta do Lago, Madeira

Not far away in a sheltered border we found tree dahlias, *D. imperialis* (fig. 12), with tall, sappy stems clothed in feathery foliage and sporting big pink flowers. I grow this in a large tub but by the time it is thinking about flowering in Hampshire the autumn is upon us and reluctantly I have to move it back into our cool glasshouse for winter protection.

In the same border we saw a plant I do not remember having seen before, *Tithonia diversifolia* (fig. 13), a woody-based perennial or subshrub which resembles a giant *Rudbeckia* or *Helianthus* with branching stems and bold, all-yellow flower-heads. It was quite impressive and I made a note to try and obtain its seed. We saw it again when visiting a garden new to us, the gardens of

the Quinta do Lago, an old, private property now a hotel, with views across Funchal to the sea beyond. It was full of pleasant surprises and jaw-dropping plants among which the Brazilian red cloak, *Megaskepasma erythrochlamys* (fig. 14), was a knock-out with its erect clumps of leafy, woody stems each displaying a large plume comprising strikingly crimson bracts and white 2-lipped flowers. Before we could recover we encountered *Bauhinia galpinii* (fig. 15), a large shrub of spreading nature with characteristic 2-lobed (camel's foot) leaves and loose clusters of orange-red flowers which put to shame the relatively tiny white flowers of the *B. brachycarpa* I grow in our garden.

On a nearby wall grew a twining climber, *Aristolochia*

gigantea (fig. 16), whose curious big, lurid purple blooms resembled those of some long forgotten or perhaps never invented medieval wind instrument. The curious and the exotic had no end and I was almost relieved to find the unmistakable glossy green, long-stalked leaves and yellow flowers of *Farfugium japonicum* (fig. 17), huge clumps growing in a moist shady refuge. Tender maybe, but at least I knew its name!

I make no apology for ending with a selection of plants we are hardly likely to grow in gardens back home, as I believe that every so often or perhaps only once we deserve such an experience, if only to open our eyes and minds to what others can grow. Who knows, perhaps they feel the same about what grows in our gardens! 🌱