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Fig. 1 *Lavandula stoechas* on steroids. The white rose in the background, left, is the unnamed adoptee from our first house.

## Adopting orphans

Alex Pankhurst

At country-house sales my mother used to embarrass my teenage self by quietly taking shrub cuttings to bring home for her garden. So what was I doing, for heaven's sake, a few years ago in a country churchyard, surreptitiously clutching a pair of secateurs in order to snip bits off a graveside plant? Well it was spring, after a really hard winter which had

killed off all the susceptible plants in my garden, things like shrubby salvias and less-hardy lavenders. Yet the day before, with time to occupy while waiting for a delayed friend, I had wandered round our local churchyard and discovered a *Lavandula stoechas*. It had not only survived, it was flourishingly large, almost smothering an old headstone. Must have

been there for years. And the vicar had just decreed that henceforth there was to be only grass in the churchyard. No plants. This robust and exciting *L. stoechas* was in, er, grave danger.

Two of the cuttings grew. One was given away but died the following year; the other was planted near my back door. Goodness, has it flourished!



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Figs 2a & b 'Climbing Mrs Herbert Stevens', a tea rose rescued from the garden of the lost Rose and Crown.

It is now more than four foot high and, having splayed, five foot wide. This is a *Lavandula stoechas* on steroids, a giant, bursting with exuberance and vitality (fig. 1). It's covered with flowers from late May, to the delight of bees, so seedlings would be expected. But there are none. Perhaps the thing is sterile. Whether it is or not, this plant is unlike any other *Lavandula stoechas* I've grown, or seen. Usually they're small, lacking enthusiasm for life, and liable to be killed, or at least knocked backwards, by severe winters. The first cuttings may have been a lucky strike, because they don't seem to root easily. But I must buck up efforts to spread my rescued orphan around. It's thrillingly different.

Like many villages, ours is losing pubs, and one, the Rose and Crown, was bought a while back to be knocked down for three houses to be built on the plot. Demolition began, which exposed its garden to street view. And there was a lovely shrub rose, eight foot high and wide, covered with double white blooms. Although not the right time of year to take cuttings, it was worth a try, so, oh dear, again armed with secateurs and this time trespassing, I snipped off likely looking pieces and stuck them in a pot. Hesitantly, one decided to live, and now I've given cuttings from it to people



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Fig. 3 A rose without a name, but a real gem.

in the village pleased to have the rose from the poor old Rose and Crown. The original was of course destroyed by the builders. I think it is 'Climbing Mrs Herbert Stevens' (figs 2a & b), a vigorous Tea Rose discovered as a sport in 1922. So it was someone else's 'happenstance' plant from the start. I like that.

No name has been discovered for my first adopted orphan, a charming little white rose from our first house, 50 years ago, in rural

south Cheshire. The land was mostly orchard, but in the garden was a small, multi-stemmed bush rose. Growing on its own roots, it is so easy to propagate it has come with me to four subsequent gardens (fig. 3). A real gem, and people I've given it to are delighted. In 1990, privileged to interview the great rosarian Graham Stuart Thomas, I took him a piece, asking what it was. But even he didn't know, and its name and origin remain a mystery.



Fig. 4 *Mimulus aurantiacus* 'Pure Gold'.



Fig. 5 *Diascia* 'Peaches and Cream'.

The Cheshire property subsequently became a tractor depot, so no hope for the garden, or any plants therein. It's good to have saved this special little rose.

I like, but find rather too tender, the orange *Mimulus aurantiacus*. A Californian native, here it is generally

regarded as a conservatory plant. A farmer's wife in the area was so taken with the species that she briefly bred them, sowing seed and producing various colours, selling them on a stall at a local plant sale. A deep yellow one she called 'Pure Gold' came home with me. And to

my delight this has proved much hardier than the type. Planted against a south-facing wall, it clearly doesn't appreciate a hard winter, yet shrugs off the setback, and flowers gloriously for weeks in the summer (fig. 4). Its creator has now lost interest in the species, and no longer has this one. I did give a young plant to a nursery some time ago, but it still isn't commercially available. It should be.

At the 2008 HPS Summer Day in Kent I was charmed by a variegated diascia called 'Peaches and Cream', thought to have been a chance seedling, on the garden plant stall of Mike and Hazel Brett. Back home, the plant spread into an eye-catching mat (fig. 5) that was subsequently much admired by visitors. With the Brett's agreement, I sent some to a West Country nursery they favoured, although it was found not reliably hardy enough to be stocked for long. Perhaps it needs the inhospitably dry conditions provided by my gravel soil and low rainfall to come through winters. I like it for itself, but with diascias currently featuring in all the plant catalogues, in new colours, breeders should surely home in on this variegated form with alacrity.

A plant adopted some forty years ago, I've only just realised was a rare rescue. We moved here in 1976, and soon after I noticed in a village front garden drifts of a most attractive oxalis.

Well two, to be precise, because while the majority were white-flowered, a few were pale pink. The householder kindly said I could have some bits of both. Just as well, because they moved soon after and the new owners paved over the front garden.

I sought a name from the RHS, who said with certainty that it was *Oxalis articulata*. Having no reason to doubt them, it's been *Oxalis articulata* in my mind for four decades. Until this spring, when I tracked down the couple's son in case he could provide information about the local business his father had worked for – which I was writing a piece about. He was very helpful, enthused about his childhood in the village, and arranged to bring some photographs. Deciding that a gift of his former home's oxalis would be a nice gesture of thanks, I looked up *O. articulata* on the internet. Only to find that there was nothing that resembled mine. Not *O. articulata*, nor any of the other oxalis in the *Plant Finder* that I googled.

Oxalis can be a nuisance, seeding all over the place. But a particular, and useful, feature of my foundlings is that both the white and the pale pink are sterile. That would point to them being hybrids (with Wood Sorrel *O. acetosella* as a likely parent – the leaves taste bitter). When the son,



Fig. 6 *Oxalis* 'Dedham Snow'.



Fig. 7 *Oxalis* 'Dedham Blush'.

now 65, visited, I asked him where the original oxalis might have come from. His father had a friend who was very knowledgeable about plants, was all he could think of.

The white-flowered form is totally hardy. It grows happily in shade or full

sun, which here can mean oven-like conditions. Being sterile, it flowers all summer. Sometimes, if stressed in midsummer drought, it suffers from a rust which destroys the leaves. Doesn't seem to stop it flowering though, and by the following spring the rust has been



Fig. 8 *Leucanthemum x superbum* 'Horace Read'.

shrugged off and the clump grows with undiminished vigour. One of the reasons I never doubted the RHS label of *O. articulata* (jointed) was that the base of the plant is jointed – you break bits off, stick 'em in the ground, and they grow. It's a thoroughly obliging plant, strong-growing, clump-forming, flowers non-stop through the summer months. A treasure.

The pink-flowered form is a little shyer. It did succumb to one winter, not long after I first had it. Fortunately I'd kept one in a pot in the greenhouse, as insurance. Since then, it's pulled through the winters.

Less strong-growing than the white, it forms clumps, but much slower. It also can be rust susceptible. The flowers are a very pale, peachy pink. Good taste personified! And again, they flower all summer. Over the years I've given rooted bits to visitors, but neither seem to have found their way into the trade.

After the recent discovery of their uniqueness, I did offer both to a nursery, but they were not interested. Instead, plants have this summer been given to Alan Bloom's son-in-law, in charge of Bressingham Garden, who will see that both are spread

around. The white is to be called *Oxalis* 'Dedham Snow' (fig. 6), and the pale pink *Oxalis* 'Dedham Blush' (fig. 7). It's pleasing to pass these wonderful orphans to the family of one of the HPS's founders. And to have given them safe haven all these years.

These are just my 'orphans' – three of which were found in the same unremarkable place. If in one village there are these special things, how many more are out there needing to be noticed, cared for and shared?

Some people adopt stray cats. With keen gardeners it's plants. And often their successors have reason to be grateful. A fine plant which I appreciate mid-summer, *Leucanthemum x superbum* 'Horace Read' (fig. 8), is the result of the unorthodox action of its namesake. In the 1920s, from a slow-moving train, he spotted a semi-double ox-eye daisy. On the return journey he pulled the communication cord, nipped out and dug it up. From that he bred the famous *L. x s.* 'Esther Read', and later the form to which his name is attached.

And to think I have scruples about being seen in the village with secateurs! 🌼

**Alex Pankhurst** has battled with drought and gravel soil in her East Anglian garden for over four decades, learning lessons every year.