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Fig. 1 *Rheum palmatum* 'Ferguson's Red'

One of a plantsperson's pleasures is to look out for and discover a worthwhile garden plant. Over the years we have had half an eye for a treasure; of course, some of what we hoped would be just that turned out less successfully, while others lived up to our expectations. The more we have travelled and seen plants that we might be able to grow, in their wild habitat or even in gardens abroad, the more experienced we have become in recognising those that might succeed and in offering them suitable conditions in cultivation.

Early in our careers we visited the then unspoiled Balearic Islands and here *Helleborus lividus* and *Paeonia cambessedesii* (fig. 2) immediately caught our eye as desirable plants to try and grow. Alas the first, while today used in the huge breeding programmes of hellebores and

in the well known hybrid *H. x sternii*, is not suitable for cultivation without protection. The second is more biddable, flowering in a sheltered sunny spot in our Surrey garden. Seed we collected for the RBG Kew produced some magnificent specimens, notably on the terrace of the old Alpine House where it regularly had some 12 or more flowers. Here in our heavy Gloucestershire soil it grows against the house in a sunny spot but rarely flowers. Others that Kew could grow in the Alpine House with protection but we never managed to retain were *Cyclamen balearicum* and the delightful *Viola jaubertiana*. More successful but perhaps not to everybody's taste is *Helicodictyon muscivorus* (fig. 3); found only in the western Mediterranean islands, it flowered annually in our Surrey garden with

Winners and losers

Keith and Lorna Ferguson

its shocking-pink spathe. In Gloucestershire it grows well in a number of locations but refuses to flower here, perhaps for fear of shocking the locals!

Dracunculus vulgaris with its deep-purple spathe thrives from our collections of nearly 50 years ago, and it increases well. It is now commonly offered in the trade. However, after recent visits to Crete we have started to grow the form occurring there which has much nicer grey-green-



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Fig. 2 *Paeonia cambessedesii*

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Fig. 3 *Helicodicerus muscivorus*

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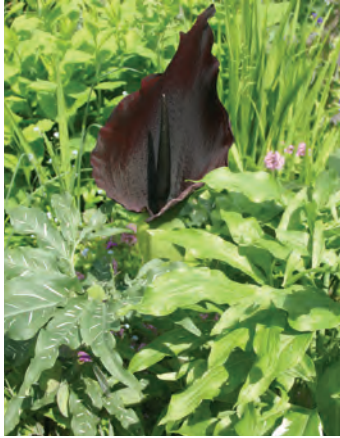


Fig. 4 *Dracunculus vulgaris*

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Fig. 5 White *Dracunculus vulgaris* on Crete

marked foliage with white bands (fig. 4) compared to the plain green foliage of our western Mediterranean form; there are populations with a white spathe (fig. 5) which we have yet to see flower in the open garden.

There are two plants that we grow that we have to thank Bob Brown for spotting in

our garden. He named them *Rheum palmatum* 'Ferguson's Red' (fig. 1) and *Acanthus spinosus* Ferguson's form (fig. 6). They have been mentioned in this journal (Vol. 35 No. 2, 2014), but the history of their discovery and their garden-worthy features have not been described before. The rheum was found in a nursery which

dealt primarily in bedding plants somewhere on the edge of Leeds. Returning from our youngest son's graduation at Durham, we looked for a spot to have a break and eat our lunch, and finding a nursery which was deserted beyond some staff eating their lunch we asked if we could eat our picnic in their car park, to which they readily agreed. We then felt obliged to at least look at the plants. After passing many of little interest to us, we found a bench with a dozen or more neglected perennials at the back of an empty greenhouse, and here we saw a large *Rheum palmatum* outgrowing its pot. Ideal for our new garden with moisture-retentive soil. Gladly sold to us, we found it had striking dark-red foliage for some weeks in spring.

The *Acanthus* is low growing, floriferous and remarkably mildew-resistant. The previous owners of our house had planted two clumps in a bank in the lawn.

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Fig. 6 *Acanthus spinosus* Ferguson's form

One was white with mildew, as were the monardas and asters nearby, but what is today known as *A. spinosus* Ferguson's form had fresh green foliage, was lower growing, and stood out as good.

On viewing our house prior to buying it, we had observed a row of *Zantedeschia aethiopica* 'Glencoe' (back cover) looking well in September (described in Vol. 30 No. 1, 2009). We gave plants to the late Michael Wickenden and to Bob Brown, who both accepted them, we felt, out of politeness. Eventually it was noted after trial in both nurseries that it flowered extremely well, exactly as we'd said, and was hardy when planted deep. Then some years later we gave Michael some pots of young plants and he was delighted and put a student to divide the contents of the pots; she managed to get 49 plants, which was the launch into the trade. Bob was not far behind, and it has been a best seller and much admired on the HPS stand at Chelsea.

Perhaps our first really exciting find was *Veratrum album* 'Lorna's Green' and later *V. album* 'Auvergne White' (Vol. 26 No 1, 2008). Both are now in the trade thanks to Michael Wickenden's enthusiasm for the genus.

Some years ago the Kew Guild had a weekend trip to see the gardens of retired staff, there then being some six of us within a radius of 40 miles. In one garden we observed a

very strong and floriferous white *Pentstemon heterophyllus* (fig. 7) by the back door. We enquired about it and was told "Oh, it was here when we bought the house". We begged a cutting or two as this promised to be a better bet than the blue *P. 'Catherine de la Mare'*, which never overwintered on our heavy wet soil. After suitable trial, when we found it vigorous and able to withstand the winter well, we took some to the Western Counties HPS Group meeting and were a bit taken aback when, after we said that we were thinking of giving it a cultivar name, Bob Brown informed us that we had been beaten as recently it had been named *P. h. 'Roundway White'*!

While writing about *Pentstemon*, we have seen many fine dwarf blue species in the area from Denver to the Pacific Coast and north to the Canadian Border, but most seem very difficult to keep in cultivation in our experience and that of gardeners in the Pacific North West. However, on our first visit to Washington State we went to the viewing point for the erupted Mount St Helens volcano. Here to our astonishment we saw that one of the successful colonisers of the lava dust was no less than *P. fruticosus* (fig. 8). There were many old seedheads so we collected some seeds and raised plants easily. This penstemon persists for some years before needing re-propagation either from seed or cutting.

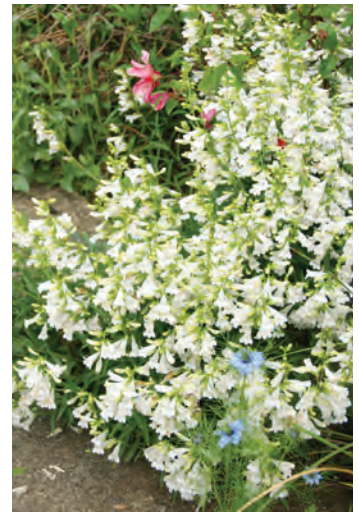


Fig. 7 *Pentstemon heterophyllus* 'Roundway White'



Fig. 8 *Pentstemon fruticosus*

Anemone ranunculoides 'Ferguson's Fancy' (fig. 9) was found in a piece of woodland in Austria when Lorna wandered away from the tour party who were having coffee and found this rather strange variant. Having bulked it up from a small piece, we gave it to Michael Wickenden and to our surprise he included it in one of his last catalogues under this name.



Fig. 9 *Anemone ranunculoides*
'Ferguson's Fancy'

It's not a flamboyant plant, but with the current enthusiasm for selections of *Anemone nemorosa* it might have some appeal. On this same trip, again on a coffee stop, we strayed and found a thicket of *Hippophae rhamnoides* covered in squashy berries. We collected some of them and raised some seedlings to see if we could get a male, as we had a female which did not berry and most of the described cultivars are female.

Indeed, in three years we had some young plants and they all turned out to be male and they have pollinated the now large female specimen which has had a magnificent show of orange berries, an alternative to the North American deciduous species of holly which do not thrive with us.

We have made many visits to the USA to see gardens and to plant hunt and photograph native plants. A worthwhile plant, not in the trade to our knowledge, is the eastern US form of *Maianthemum racemosum* (figs 10a & b). Dan Hinkley (*The Explorer's Garden*, Timber Press 1999) pointed out that the form commonly grown in our gardens is a polyploid (with more than two sets of chromosomes) which is the western form, while the eastern form is diploid. Hinkley refers to the western form setting berries in the wild, but we have grown three different collections of the usual western form found in gardens in the UK and

they rarely if ever produce berries. However, we have found that in cultivation the eastern form is not quite as vigorous but flowers later with rather creamy white flowers and produces great swags of marbled berries which turn red, adding interest to the shade garden in late summer.

Dianthus species – pinks and border carnations, especially the more modern cultivars – are not really happy on our soil, however modified, and need constant attention. However we have found two that thrive with effective neglect. 'Frank's Frilly' (fig. 11), an old variety with a small red double flowerhead and very fragrant, we originally obtained from Frank Lawley of Herterton House Garden Nursery, Northumberland, though it appears to be named after Frank Waley according to Richard Bird in his book on border pinks. We have had it since the mid-1970s and it has grown equally well on Bagshot sand in Surrey and on heavy west-Gloucestershire clay.



Figs 10 a & b *Maianthemum racemosum* Eastern USA form

The other variety is 'Old Velvet' (fig. 12), a semi-double with almost flat, rich-dark-purple velvet-like flowers with a white edge. It was found locally and raised from cuttings, and has been growing and flowering in the same place for well over 7 years with no attention.

In the autumn the year after the terrible 9/11 event in the USA we visited gardens in the Philadelphia region, the Dupont Gardens and many belonging to members of the Mid-Atlantic Hardy Plant Society. One garden had a row of six or more fine specimens of *Cornus kousa* (fig. 13) smothered in ripe red fruit. We begged a few fruits to see what the seedlings would be like. Now some 15 years later we have two fine small trees, flowering very well and fruiting almost as well as we recall the parent.

They are equal to anything in the trade in our opinion. At the same time we obtained some ripe red berries of the Eastern Flowering *Cornus florida*. The seedlings have been a great disappointment, making small shrubs no more than 5ft high which have never flowered. A specimen of *Cornus florida* we were given at about the same time, bought in the UK trade, behaved in exactly the same manner, scarcely growing and producing an occasional flower. In fact this is to be expected as *C. florida*, although growing to fine small trees which make an amazing show down the eastern USA, is known not

to flourish in UK gardens as we do not regularly get hot enough summers to ripen the wood and make good flower buds.

Older cultivars of some plants that do well for us are often unknown to and admired by fellow plantspeople include *Papaver* (Oriental Group) 'May Queen' (fig. 14). It has semi-double orange flowers which form an early riot of colour in the border. Very vigorous, stoloniferous, but not so invasive that one cannot enjoy it. It dies down early and in our borders the space is covered with the herbaceous *Clematis tubulosa* 'Wye Vale' and *Crocosmia* species. Another favourite and a delightful winter winner is *Iris unguicularis* 'Walter Butt' (fig. 15) with large pale-mauve falls. These two we value greatly and have had since the mid 1970s when we were given them by the late Moira Reid of Liskeard.



Fig. 11 *Dianthus* 'Frank's Frilly'



Fig. 12 *Dianthus* 'Old Velvet'



Fig. 13 *Cornus kousa*

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Fig. 14 *Papaver* (Oriental Group) 'May Queen'

Some years ago, visiting in August Ron McBeath's nursery (now closed) on the Scottish border, we observed sheets of *Cyananthus* carpeting the gravel paths and hanging from troughs and

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Fig. 15 *Iris unguicularis* 'Walter Butt'

raised beds. We brought home a selection to try, and they have been winners. Notably *C. lobatus x microphyllus* and *C. lobatus* (fig. 16) flower in late summer on the edge of paths and in a

raised bed, providing sheets of lovely clear-blue flowers. The white form has not done quite as well. They are easily propagated from cuttings.

Our most recent treasure was the gift of an excellent clone of *Cypripedium formosanum* (fig. 17). Planted in heavy clay, modified with some leaf mould in a shade border, it produced one flower the first year, three the second year, and appeared to be running. This has proved true as we have had over 30 flowers in the current season. The strongly pleated obovate leaves persist during the summer and are a feature in themselves.

We still seek new plants enthusiastically, especially as this year's weather will leave gaps to be filled. 🌸

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Fig. 16 *Cyananthus lobatus*

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Fig. 17 *Cypripedium formosanum*

Keith and Lorna Ferguson are retired professional botanists and life-long gardeners. They have a garden on neutral heavy clay in west Gloucestershire.