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Fig. 1 *Paeonia* (Gansu Group) 'Sandrine'

**President's
perspective
– plants,
people,
places**

Roy Lancaster

The late Geoffrey Smith frequently reminded me in many years' correspondence how lucky we were to be gardeners. "Just think," he would add, "we might have been politicians!" I am reminded of this as I begin writing these notes on the day (15th January) that politicians after months (seems like years) of debate and dispute are poised to vote on the Brexit question. I will not comment on the political consequences but I will say that whether we leave or stay in the European Union it will not prevent those of us who love gardens and plants from continuing a free exchange of views and information. Just as plants in the wild are not bound by political borders, so, too, will relations in the gardening fraternity worldwide continue to grow and flourish.

For me, 2018 brought challenges of many kinds,

happy events and sad ones too. On a cold day in January I bit the bullet and removed several shrubs which had become too large or misshapen, while others such as *Philadelphus* 'Belle Etoile', my favourite, I pruned hard back to almost ground level, knowing it would make a rapid recovery. I also pruned the vigorous, viciously thorny stems of a wild China rose, *Rosa chinensis* var. *spontanea*, and fixed it more firmly to the fence.

February brought with it a flood of snowdrops and though I do not regard myself as a serious collector of these charming bulbous perennials I do have my favourites, among which is *Galanthus* 'Fieldgate Tiffany' (fig. 2) with its combination of erect, broad and bloomy, ribby leaves and sumptuous flowers. If I were forced to grow only one, this is it. Not content

with our own snowdrops, towards the end of the month Sue and I journeyed to Herefordshire for one of Veronica Cross's now famous snowdrop lunches. Those fortunate to have attended these occasions will never forget the warm welcome and generous hospitality Veronica and her husband Giles offer their visitors, nor the legendary camaraderie of Galanthophiles when



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Fig. 2 *Galanthus* 'Fieldgate Tiffany'

Fig. 3 *Ribes laurifolium*Fig. 4 *Echinocactus grusonii*Fig. 5 *Hacquetia epipactis*

enjoying and discussing their favourite flowers. Veronica's collection is spread over a large area of garden with some woodland but she is also known for her wider interests in perennials, trees and shrubs.

On the day, I was surprised and delighted to note a fine young specimen of *Sorbus helena*, a rare Chinese rowan, while the shrub which attracted most admiration was a superb specimen of evergreen *Ribes laurifolium* (fig. 3), a male form in full flower growing against a low wall. It was said to be derived from a well-known example growing against the wall of the late plantswoman and Galanthophile Amy Doncaster's house, just around the corner from our home in Chandler's Ford, Hampshire.

Two days later, the thermometer registered -2°C as 'The Beast from the East' arrived. On the morning of 1st March we drew back our bedroom curtains to find it snowing and later, on the radio, we heard that the Met Office had issued a Red Alert as The Beast was locking horns with Storm Emma coming in from the south. Subsequently, a visit to Abbotsbury Subtropical Gardens revealed damage to some of the exotic plants for which this garden is famous, including *Echium pininana*, *Aeonium arboreum* and *Buddleja*

madagascariensis, while others such as hedychioms and tree ferns suffered damage to their foliage. Generally speaking, I was more surprised by those plants which had escaped damage, and on my next visit in July a first-time visitor would not have guessed what had occurred. The power of some plants to recover from cold never fails to surprise me, though a good deal depends on the growing conditions and available shelter. The biggest problem, according to curator Steve Griffith, occurs when cold and wet combine, especially in the soil. I was amused to see that Steve had provided small umbrellas for some of the more succulent plants including *Echinocactus grusonii* (fig. 4). Like all skilled and experienced gardeners, Steve has many tricks in his armoury which have served him well in protecting his charges.

A highlight of the month for Sue and me was a trip to Tiverton to attend the HPS AGM and Lecture Day, which we much enjoyed. It is on occasions such as this that I am reminded how lucky I am to be a member let alone the President of our Society, and I made full use of this opportunity to meet fellow members, some from afar, and experience at first hand the dedication and hard work brought by the Society's officers to steering the Society on a

safe and sound course while providing its members with a rich menu of activities and opportunities. Well done the Devon Group and the speakers too, who are among the best in the business.

In March I was sad to hear of the death of John Kenyon, who I came to know quite well during my time as a presenter with BBC's *Gardeners' World* in the 1980s. As producer and director, he encouraged me to share the stories of plants I saw in the gardens we visited, but whenever I used a botanical name, especially an unfamiliar one, I would hear him on feedback asking "Has it got a common name?" Eventually he gave up!

A journey in April took us to Arabella Lennox-Boyd's garden, Gresgarth in north Lancashire. We had two tours of the garden, which is beautifully designed in a rugged landscape, but we only managed to see and discuss a thimbleful of the many plants she grows including *Hacquetia epipactis* (fig. 5), an old favourite of mine from my two years as a student gardener at the Cambridge University Botanic Garden. It grew in a bed by a stream accompanied by an equally attractive planting of *Pulmonaria* 'Mawson's Blue'. The tree planting, with lots of rarities, extends up a wooded valley and I will never forget the steep slopes covered with bluebells and greater woodrush (*Luzula*

sylvatica) leading down to the rushing tea-coloured river below. We sped homewards south along the M6 with a gift of tree-peony seedlings rattling in their box in our car boot.

In May a small film crew visited our garden to record an interview and film some of my Chinese plants for a series of programmes being made for Chinese television. The Chinese producer, a young man, explained that it had been requested by their government following the successful showing in China of the groundbreaking BBC series *The Blue Planet*. They had been

asked to make a series of their own, highlighting the importance of Chinese native flowers and plants and how they had benefited gardens in the West. It was a warm sunny day and right on cue I had two very special candidates waiting to make their Chinese TV debut: *Paeonia* (Gansu Group) 'Sandrine' (fig. 1), a beautiful Chinese tree peony, and the even more eye-catching Chinese Dove tree, *Davidia involucrata*, a smaller-growing form named 'Sonoma' (fig. 6) which despite its relatively small size (2m) and youth was flaunting around a hundred large, pendent



Fig. 6 *Davidia involucrata* 'Sonoma'

Fig. 7 *Philadelphus purpurascens*Fig. 8 *P. maculatus* 'Sweet Clare'Fig. 9 *Deutzia x hybrida* 'Iris Alford'

white handkerchief-like blooms. The film crew were delighted.

Deutzias and philadelphus are among the most reliable of hardy shrubs for late-spring/early-summer flowering and there are plenty to choose from. In early June in our garden I was thrilled to find *Philadelphus purpurascens* (fig. 7) opening its exquisitely scented, white cup-shaped blooms with yellow anthers and purple-tinged calyxes poised along arching branches. I have grown it for only a couple of years and it pleased me no end to see its first flowering. In a neighbouring border I also grow *P. maculatus* 'Sweet Clare' (fig. 8), a smaller, more mounded shrub producing a myriad little cup-shaped, sweetly fragrant blooms which are white with a pale purple eye. This one is tailor-made for smaller gardens and spaces.

In another border I have *Deutzia x hybrida* 'Iris Alford' (fig. 9), named by an ex-Hillier nursery foreman the late 'Alf' Alford for his wife. This is a splendid, rumbustious shrub, capable of making a magnificent mound of arching stems flooded in June with flowers of a deep purple-pink in bud, opening white inside, deep purple-pink on the reverse. As with all my deutzias and philadelphus, I prune the flowering stems back to a lower bud after the blooms are spent.

For many years I have grown *Ophiopogon bodinieri* (fig. 10) in a border beneath shrubs. While making excellent ground cover, it had never flowered until last year in June when Sue, having decided to severely reduce its spread, discovered a small patch displaying its slender, erect racemes of small but pretty, nodding, blue bell-flowers. I decided to pot on a few divisions to share with friends but each gift will come with a warning as to its rhizomatous ramblings. My hope is that restricting it to a pot might promote more regular flowering. It was introduced to cultivation from Yunnan, China by Chris Brickell and Alan Leslie (B&L 12505) in 1998.

In mid-June I found myself visiting the Sir Harold Hillier Gardens with our recently married daughter Holly with the object of showing her plants suitable for the small garden she and her husband Dan have inherited at their home in Petersfield. She decided on several hardy and reliable perennials including *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *sullivantii* 'Goldsturm', then was blown away by a bold clump of banana *Musa basjoo* (fig. 11), a whole colony of it thriving in sheltered beds where it's well protected and the crowns heavily mulched over winter.

Of course she had to try one, which I eventually managed to locate and buy at a nursery in Cornwall who kindly brought it with them for collection at the RHS Hampton Court Flower Show the following month.

In June, one of the most interesting perennials flowering for the first time with me was *Phlomis atropurpurea* (fig. 12). It hails from N W Yunnan, China, and has basal clusters of long-stalked, heart-shaped, puckered leaves and erect stems to 30cm tall, bearing congested whorls of small flowers coloured a very dark purple, almost black at a glance. It appears to be at home in the full sun and acidic sand of our front garden, though in the wild it is said to grow in boggy soils.

By the end of the month our garden, like many others, was beginning to suffer from the heat. I

recorded 30°C on June 26th and I was having to water some plants each or every other evening. *Lychnis sieboldii* was particularly prone to wilting with the heat, but its brilliant orange flowers were well worth the pampering.

One of the surprises of summer was *Polygonatum latifolium* (fig. 13), originating from a woodland in Transylvania. I grow it in a shady border at the

side of the house and despite the heat its bold, broad, shining green leaves were intact and attractive throughout summer. When the leaves of *P. x hybridum* and its cultivars had long since been lacerated and skeletonised by sawfly larvae, those of *P. latifolium* remained undamaged and highly decorative.

For many years, on a particular day in August Sue and I have joined a



Fig. 10 *Ophiopogon bodinieri*



Fig. 11 *Musa basjoo*

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Fig. 12 *Phlomis atropurpurea*Fig. 13 *Polygonatum latifolium*Fig. 14 *Eucomis* 'Leia'

friend for a walk on the Isle of Wight in memory of our friend's late wife who loved the island. We take the ferry from Lymington to Yarmouth where our walk, on a circular coastal route, begins and ends. Last year on our returning to the ferry we passed in one of the town's narrow streets a small general store outside of which was a stand displaying plants for sale.

As we hurried past to reach the terminal, I spotted a tray containing several potted plants of a charming miniature *Eucomis* with dense racemes of reddish-pink flowers (fig. 14). It was labelled 'Leia'. "Blow the ferry," I thought, "I must have one of these." It cost me £3.99 and almost cost our place on the ferry as we dashed to the terminal just in time. I later repotted the plant and for two weeks or more it continued in bloom on our patio steps. It belongs to a group of hybrids known as the Aloha Lily Series in which, given its small stature, *E. zambesiaca* has presumably played a part.

Also on our patio is a plant in a pot named *Fordiophyton faberi* (fig. 15), belonging to the *Tibouchina* family. Given to me as a division by Victoria Wakefield, it is a low-growing perennial, herbaceous with me, with prettily veined leaves and fleshy angular shoots. The flowers when they

appear from September into autumn are a bright cerise pink and though the individual, tear-drop-shaped clusters are relatively small, they pepper the plant to make a colourful, attractive low mound. Not trusting it to be hardy, I keep it under glass through winter.

In September, too, we paid a visit to Walmer Castle in Kent where we were fortunate enough to meet the Head Gardener, Mark Bent, and his staff. Mark gave us a tour of the gardens which I will remember for its excellent maintenance and its inspired use of exotic foliage in The Queen Mother's garden, especially *Melianthus major* and *Ensete ventricosum*. The herbaceous borders too we found impressive.

A visit in October to Orticolario, an annual flower show held in the grounds of the Villa Erba at Cernobbio on the shores of Lake Como in Italy, provided a much-needed break for us. I cannot imagine a more beautiful site for a show, with its lake and mountains and its impressive trees. I was delighted by the range of plants for sale. Indeed, the show's theme plant was *Salvia* and I have never seen so many species and cultivars, shrubby and herbaceous, displayed in one place. Some of the local restaurants also supported the theme with such delicacies as deep-

fried salvia leaves and salvia soup. An incidental highlight of this weekend was a boat trip on the lake to see the carefully tailored garden of the Villa del Balbianello, where one of its many charms are the semi-wild intrusions of local vegetation including populations of *Cyclamen purpurascens* and *Helleborus niger* subsp. *macranthus*, neither in flower at the time.

As ever, December proved our busiest month with Christmas cards to write to friends near and far and, just as exhausting though equally enjoyable, preparations for the arrival of family including our young grandchildren. In between the hanging of cards, stringing of lights and evergreen decorations, not forgetting the traditional Christmas tree and its decorations (I fix it in place, Sue decorates it) there was still time to enjoy our garden. As in previous years, we all admired the flowering of *Camellia japonica* 'Bokuhan' (fig. 16), a camellia of ancient origin whose miniature cup-shaped blooms of blood red with a bold centre of white petaloids glow like gemstones even on overcast days.

Delivering cards to local friends, I called to see an elderly widowed lady we have long known, once a stalwart of the local garden club. She lives on her own with her memories of a garden once carefully tended

and planted with an array of perennials and favourite shrubs, now gradually succumbing to neglect. She beamed on opening her door to my knock and invited me in for a cup of tea and a good chat about plants and plantspeople. Her great joy that morning had been a letter from her son's family now living in New Zealand and a selection of photographs taken of the family, including one of her first great-grandchild.

As the new year's snowdrops began appearing, a most beautiful book, *The Galanthophiles*, by HPS members Jane Kilpatrick and Jennifer Harmer, our Society Historian, arrived on my desk. I spent 10 minutes or so enjoying the look and feel of the book before examining its contents, which brought further joy. Its subtitle, *100 years of Snowdrop Devotees*, offers but a clue as to the amount of research it has taken to present these fascinating stories. If you are a snowdrop devotee then you simply must have this book. If you are a gardener who delights in accounts featuring plants, people and places you will find equal reward.

The eye-catching cover of another book by one of our members, Judy Barker's *Hardy Garden Chrysanthemums*, provides a foretaste of the wealth of cultivars now



Fig. 15 *Fordiophyton faberi*



Fig. 16 *Camellia japonica* 'Bokuhan'

available to gardeners, and recommended by the author and others from personal experience. If you have never tried them but feel tempted, let this booklet be your guide.

Geoffrey Smith's words come to mind again: we are lucky to be gardeners, and the joy and pleasure plants bring to our lives increases tenfold when shared. 🌸