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Fig. 1 Thick grass and weeds lavishly decorated with builders' rubbish.

Of weeds, winds, water and wildlife

Judy Harry

In articles about starting a new garden it's common to use the cliché 'blank canvas'; however, the kind of canvas that confronted us on our move to the Outer Hebrides was perhaps not what is usually meant. The very open land surrounding our renovated cottage was free of trees and even of garden plants, but it was certainly not free of vegetation. There was plant life in abundance, but apart from some lovely white bluebells (fig. 2), which are widespread here, the flora consisted of thick grass and weeds decorated with lavish quantities of builders' rubbish (fig. 1). Getting to grips with the weeds has been a large part of the story so far: learning to identify the huge variety of grasses and sedges must wait until some time in the future.

It is ironic that the most abundant herbaceous resident here, the buttercup, is an old adversary of mine. There was a marginal area in our Lincolnshire garden where, in spite of digging, weeding, skimming and mulching, buttercups persisted with cheerful vigour. Once the summer is under way on the Isle of Lewis, the land is yellow with their blooms (fig. 3). The Gaelic name for the buttercup – Buidheag an t-Samhraidh – roughly

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Fig. 2 This white form of the true bluebell was the only 'garden plant' present.

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Fig. 3 Typical summer landscape, yellow with buttercups.

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Fig. 4 'on the damp side'

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Fig. 5 Silverweed foliage making a lovely picture with Scots Lovage.

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Fig. 6 Our very own 'Cloth of Gold'

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Fig. 7 'the lupin winds'

translates as 'the small yellow of summer', a concise indication of their predominance. On land like ours, which might be politely described as 'on the damp side' (fig. 4) and has been untilled for decades, buttercups thrive; what's more, the specimens already growing conceal the fact that the ground beneath holds a reservoir of seed, ready to provide replacements with startling rapidity.

A rather more interesting native is Silverweed, *Potentilla anserina*. Its beautiful silver-backed foliage is like a small version of melianthus and it often combines with other wild plants in a most planterly way (fig. 5). Silverweed can grow to lush proportions, but it can also lie low, as in a patch of mown grass behind the house, where it spreads its clear lemon flowers out, almost a cloth of gold in early summer (fig. 6). Less appealing are its methods of vegetative propagation: in addition to flinging out runners in all directions, in cultivated soil the smallest pieces of overlooked root soon produce plants. It's interesting that *Potentilla* generally do well here, from the tiny Tormentil, *P. erecta* (syn. *P. tormentilla*), to shrubby *P. fruticosa* which is widely used in local authority planting on the island, where it flowers abundantly at the end of the summer. I have always liked these shrubs so I'm delighted to see *P. f.* 'Primrose Beauty' doing well in one of our pioneering borders. More varieties are consequently on order.

Although our land carries an inevitable bank of weeds and grass, I wouldn't want you to think that the story so far has been one of unrewarding toil. Our first year of gardening has been unexpectedly blessed, in great measure thanks to some very benign weather, with spring 2018 in particular warm and sunny. We are, however, coming to understand some of the 'local difficulties' caused by the climate, and midsummer introduced us to what some call 'the lupin winds' (fig. 7). In my last article [Vol. 39, No. 1] I said that lupins do well: they do, but they're often battered by gales that routinely strike just as they come to their peak. I've noticed that when this happens to other plants in full growth their strategy is simply to lie down, then produce numerous side shoots, and flower all the better for it.

A plant which demonstrated this approach to great effect was Red Campion, *Silene dioica* (fig. 8). It must have travelled incognito in a pot of something precious I brought with me, and

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Fig. 8 Red Campion showing how to withstand gales, with dark-leaved thrift and pink-flowered sea campion in the background.

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Fig. 9 Quick-growing *Hesperis matronalis* and *Antirrhinum majus* put on a good show.

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Fig. 10 Rather to my surprise, *Echium vulgare* 'Blue Bedder' and its companions *Hosta* 'Striptease' and *Campanula poscharskyana* found our conditions very much to their liking.

it's thrived, producing quantities of flower-bearing side growths for weeks and weeks. I realise of course that to be singing the praises of something so ordinary shows a lamentable lack of sophistication for a Hardy Planter, but here hardiness is all. Also, whatever one learns from 'ordinary' plants can surely, in time, be applied to more rarefied specimens.

The principles guiding our choice of plants so far have been simple: go for quick-growing things; tough things; and things, possibly variants of local wild plants, which have some hope of coping with the specific, very challenging, conditions. As a result, the garden, such as it is, has been colourful with quick-flowering plants grown from seed (fig. 9). *Hesperis matronalis*, from the HPS Seed Exchange, flowered in its first year and was still hard at it in October, a phenomenon that I had never experienced before. Likewise, *Cosmos bipinnatus* flowered non-stop from May, while seed-sown *Antirrhinum majus* and *Echium vulgare* 'Blue Bedder' performed beyond all expectations (fig. 10). I'd brought the snapdragon seed with me, collected from one or two random plants in our previous garden, and it produced plants so generous with blooms that they provided masses of cut flowers; I had forgotten its endearing habit of continuing to grow once cut and put in a vase. The echium was a generous parting gift from a fellow member; it excelled and was a constant source of food for bees (fig. 11). I'd been doubtful that a plant with hairy leaves and, as I had thought, a liking for alkaline conditions, would appreciate Hebridean damp acid soil. How wrong I was.

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Fig. 11 'a generous parting gift'

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Fig. 12 'my consignment of HPS seeds'

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Fig. 13 'Of course, it's just peat there': an ominous view of the proposed veg patch.

Toughness and adaptability have been demonstrated by two 'wild variants' in particular. Seaside cliffs and rocks in this area are noted for both sea campion and thrift so, when I noticed a small patch of gritty and stony soil near the standpipe, I was quick to plant *Silene uniflora* 'Rosea' and *Armeria maritima* 'Rubrifolia' there. Both have proved the wisdom of this policy, and the pretty campion is particularly appealing.

It has been some years since I had such success with both seeds and cuttings. I am wondering if it has to do with the acidity of the water since the use of various acids in the horticultural industry, for example to break seed dormancy, is well known; might our acid water be doing something similar? This very unscientific supposition may be wide of the mark, but my consignment of HPS seed germinated so abundantly that I was constantly being taken by surprise by pots green all over with germinating seedlings (fig. 12). Inevitably this led to some damping off, and I had to be very careful not to overwater seedlings under cover. Meanwhile, cuttings of those shrubs known to do well here showed equal vigour, growing rapidly and enabling me to plant out decent-sized plants within a year of the cuttings being

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Fig. 14 'a drainage channel which appears to be working...'

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Fig. 15 *Iris* x *robusta* 'Gerald Darby' holds its flowers well.

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Fig. 16 'delighted to leave unmown'

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Fig. 17 The islands of the Outer Hebrides are famous for flower-rich machair.

taken. I have learned that perennials raised from seed need to be well established before they are planted out but, once settled in our peaty soil, they quickly form wonderful root systems. It's clear why peat has been the preferred substrate for the horticultural industry for so long.

Not only is the water here very acid, but it is, to use our own term, 'lazy'. The structure of the soil, particularly where it's peaty, is unlike anything we have encountered before. The contractor who did a lot of groundwork surveyed the piece of land that we had earmarked as a potential vegetable garden, and pronounced ominously 'Of course, it's just peat there' (fig. 13). We wondered what that might mean and soon found out: peaty soil holds water in a curious embrace, preventing it moving up or down or from side to side. A drainage channel which appears to be working can have standing water a couple of inches away (fig. 14). During the very dry weeks in June 2018 this was a benefit, of course, and the vegetable garden in fact thrived. Next year may be different, and it may be necessary to build raised beds.

Having for years gardened in a very dry area, I am now acquiring, begging, or raising plants for moist conditions. A border that is consistently wet is slowly being planted with moisture-lovers: primulas of all sorts, *Lythrum salicaria*, *Lysimachia*, *Iris* x *robusta* 'Gerald Darby', *Iris sibirica*, and *Trollius europaeus*. I had lost *Lysimachia ephemerum* in Lincolnshire so I was very pleased to raise plenty of this rather elegant plant from my HPS seeds. However, I'm now doubtful that they are what they say they are, as the leaves lack the grey colouring I would expect from this species. Which gives me an opportunity to plead that members make all possible efforts to ensure that the seed they send in is correctly named.

Iris x *robusta* 'Gerald Darby' (fig. 15) came with us in the pot that had been its home for some time. Not surprisingly it had not really thrived, but now it's making the most of the sort of conditions it really likes. The inky shading at the base of the fans of foliage is most elegant, and the blue flowers persist well. Moisture-loving irises will, I suspect, become a feature here, but I am very aware that it is not simply a question of picking a damp spot and bunging them in: if the site is waterlogged

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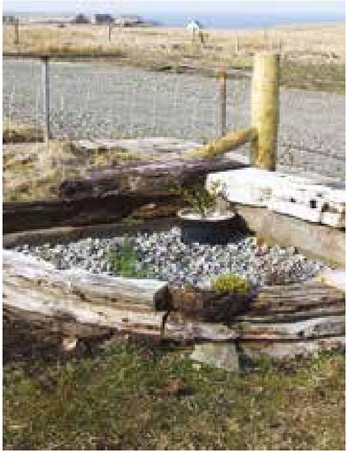

Fig. 18 Weathered timbers, including old ships' prows, were put to good use for the raised herb bed.

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Fig. 19 The herb bed was speedily established despite its exposed position, surprising us all.

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Fig. 20 'gobbling up mouthfuls of herbs'

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Fig. 21 *Geranium cinereum* Rothbury Gem proved to be irresistible to rabbits.

during winter it could easily spell the end for species like *Iris sibirica*, *I. ensata*, and *I. setosa*, though varieties of *Iris* x *robusta* and *I. pseudacorus* should be able to cope.

We also have a very wet area in the 'wild part' of our land which my husband is delighted to leave unmown (fig. 16), where I hope to establish Marsh Marigold, Ragged Robin, Meadowsweet, Flag Iris and Mimulus, all of which grow wild hereabouts. One of the joys of living here is that I can overdose on wild flowers, having been brought up to spot and identify them wherever we went. There are several sites locally where in one eyeful there are maritime flowers on shingle banks, wetland plants in a stream, and meadow flowers in grassland. And of course, there is the famous machair with its unbelievable carpets of flowers (fig. 17). It's enough to make one quite drunk.

Back in the garden, we also wanted to establish a collection of culinary herbs; as they would mostly not appreciate having wet feet, we decided to build a raised bed. The construction was also an opportunity to use some of the builders' debris, which could more pretentiously be described as vernacular archaeology. The old door and window lintels proved to be railway sleepers (where had they come from, we wondered, in this rail-free environment?) and the old corner-strainer fence posts had the unmistakable curve of boat prows (fig. 18). Apparently they often came from fishing boats whose owners never returned from World War I; using these mute reminders was very moving.

The herbs have mostly thrived and, as they're only a few paces from the back door, have been much used (fig. 19). Only two struggled to get established, and that was thanks to the starlings based in a ruined house on neighbouring land. For some reason they found the young herbs irresistible, particularly golden-leaved lemon balm (which succumbed in the end) and variegated sage. Lovage too was favoured and it was not unusual to see beautifully shiny birds gobbling mouthfuls of herbs: no wonder they looked so healthy! (fig. 20). Starlings are very common here, unlike much of the UK, routinely nesting in dry-stone walls and stony ruins.

Rabbits are also numerous. Their behaviour follows a clear pattern, as those of you similarly afflicted will know: young plants adjacent to their habitual routes seem most likely to suffer, which can be infuriating. I put a wire netting cover over the tiny rock garden where they'd nibbled very pretty *Geranium cinereum* Rothbury Gem (fig. 21), bred I think by Cyril Foster and Robin Moss in Northumberland, but the problem persisted. It was a while before I realised that the little demons were pressing the wire guard flat in order to reach the leaves and flowers (fig. 22). It was no consolation to know that geraniums are on the list of rabbit-proof plants at the back of Graham Stuart Thomas's classic *Perennial Garden Plants*. Of course, as we all know, rabbits are not in the habit of reading books.

They naturally much prefer to feast on young tender plants (don't we all) and some small seed-raised perennials have also had a tough time. My HPS seed order included *Sidalcea candida* (fig. 23), which I have wanted to grow for some time, and I was delighted to raise a handful of little plants to set out. Unfortunately the rabbits were also delighted, and the sidalceas too had to be given the protection of a wire cage while they struggled to put out new leaves (fig. 24).

However, some plants surprisingly benefited from being rabbit-pruned, and I now refer not so much to 'the Chelsea Chop' as 'the Lapins' Lop'. Some rather spindly seed-raised plants of *Malva sylvestris* var. *mauritiana* 'Mystic Merlin' (fig. 25) received

Fig. 22 'the little demons were pressing the wire down'

Fig. 23 I have wanted to grow *Sidalcea candida*, which I know likes conditions here, for some time.

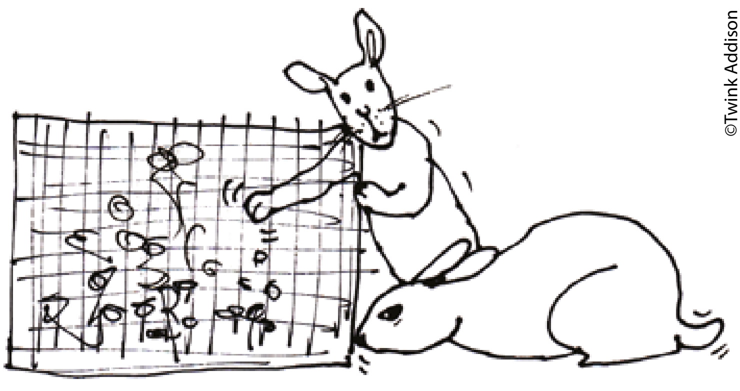

Fig. 24 'the protection of a wire cage'

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Fig. 25 *Malva sylvestris mauritiana* 'Mystic Merlin', having been rabbit-pruned, flowered determinedly through the first autumn gale and even produced some seed 'cheeses'

a severe pruning and as a result flowered as foot-high plants with great enthusiasm, battling on in the face of the first autumn gales in October. I am hoping that mallows will remain free of the rust which was endemic in our Lincolnshire garden. I am very fond of them, particularly their fascinating 'cheeses' where the wedge-shaped seeds are packed neatly into flat discs.

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Fig. 27 'we can always sit back'

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Fig. 26 "Where do you live..."

Getting hold of plants is a bit of a lottery, but we have two garden centres in town and there is usually something there to tempt the keen gardener. At one, however, on being asked "Where do you live?" it was a little disconcerting to be greeted with "Good luck" in a tone of voice that clearly signified "You must be daft" (fig. 26). Certainly we are trying to garden in a very exposed part of the island, and daft we may be, but fortunately not too disconcerted.

I've been surprised by how much fun it is to be a beginner all over again, and by how little I am bothered by failures. After all, we are thankful for anything that we do manage to get established and, if all else fails, we can always sit back and enjoy some of the finest weeds and wild flowers you'll find in the northern hemisphere (fig. 27).

Judy Harry recently moved from Lincolnshire to the northern end of the Isle of Lewis, where she's enjoying seeing just what will grow there.