

Chop it down??

Souren Ala

©Souren Ala



Fig. 1 Southerly view from front garden

When we visit celebrated gardens, we enjoy looking at beautiful combinations of plants and colours; but even more memorable than these can be the structural elements of the garden, and its position within the surrounding landscape. In this issue of the journal, Bob Brown dwells on garden structure and setting, and gives examples of some more – and some less – successful outcomes. Upon reading his article it occurred to me that in my own very small garden, I am approaching a dilemma of this same sort.

One of the things that drew me to this corner of northwest Hampshire in the autumn of 2011 was the wonderful southerly view from the front garden. The garden itself was nothing more than a scrubby lawn enclosed by a rectangular fence, but the real riches lay beyond: a field with horses, backed by views of a nearby hamlet and gently rolling hills in the distance (fig. 1).

Though very photogenic, our position is also exposed to wind and rain from the southwest. But from a gardening point of view it was exciting to have a front garden which enjoys almost uninterrupted sun.

The property is not ours, but the landlord hasn't (so far) objected to my experiments in the garden. So, after living here a couple of years, thinking it would be nice to bring some interest to the foreground and to 'punctuate' the view, I

considered planting a small tree in a strategic location (fig. 2). It would have to be tough, beautiful, adaptable to our poor soil over chalk; and above all, not get too big. After much deliberation I settled on an ornamental pear, *Pyrus calleryana* 'Chanticleer', fastigate in shape, tidy and tough; perfect for our needs.

And so it proved. The tree was planted in line with the corner of the fence, which points arrow-like to the distant view. It has grown well, shrugging

©Souren Ala



Fig. 2 Newly planted *Pyrus calleryana* 'Chanticleer'

off the worst winds and rainstorms, summer drought and winter cold, and we have grown very fond of it (figs 3-5). Beneath it are a mat of *Sisyrinchium idahoense* var. *bellum*, and seedlings of *Dianthus carthusianorum* and *Oenothera* 'Apricot Delight' (fig. 6) grown from HPS seed.

Soon though, I found it necessary to increase my planted space to house the plants which inevitably find their way into a gardener's possession, and I dug out an L-shaped strip of ground (fig. 4). Though ridiculously narrow, I felt it nicely reflected the shape of the boundary. Plus, I had no wish to create more garden maintenance than I already had on my hands.

A number of plants were introduced into this very small space, notably *Stipa gigantea* and *Eremurus robustus* (fig. 7) – sadly only one eremurus remains, but I will try again. I have enjoyed *Digitalis ferruginea* year after year: they are reasonably perennial, very drought-tolerant and set seed. *Gaura lindheimeri* has also done well: cast-offs from a friend who grew them from seed as summer bedding, but found them to be much too tall and wobbly. They have survived three winters here. They do wobble, so this year I gave the more vigorous ones a 'Chelsea chop'; but by August it has hardly made a difference to their size (fig. 8).



©Souren Ala

Fig. 3



©Souren Ala

Fig. 4



©Souren Ala

Fig. 5 With Tulip 'Ballerina'



©Souren Ala

Fig. 6 Seedling of *Oenothera* 'Apricot Delight'

In these beds I also tried out some asters. Exotic, tall *Symphyotrichum laeve* 'Calliope', which promises much with striking dark stems and leaves, and typical blue-mauve flowers; *S. lateriflorum* 'Lady in Black' and *S. 'Prairie Purple'*. The best-behaved is 'Lady in Black', maintaining its shape well (fig. 9), and displaying a myriad of small, white, reflexed flowers in autumn. In contrast, 'Calliope' is

completely untameable, sending out long stolons in unpredictable directions. Worse, without support its tall stems collapse in the most ungainly fashion (fig. 10). I thought I was on to a winner with *S. 'Prairie Purple'*, but what started off as stately, self-supporting plants in the first year have subsequently dwindled almost to the point of disappearance. The opposite behaviour has been displayed

by *Rudbeckia subtomentosa* 'Henry Eilers'; after a slow start it has clumped up very well this year.

Predictably, my inventory of plants has outgrown the allocated space. The tree though continues to flourish, and the narrow beds get their brief ration of shade each morning and afternoon in turn as its shadow traverses the front garden, the whole thing acting as an organic sundial.

Last winter I undertook improvements which have snowballed into a complete revamp of the front garden. I built a small patio at the centre, from which we can properly enjoy the view (fig. 11). Naturally, rather than a boring lawn, we will want to be cocooned in a glorious mix of tall perennials and grasses waving gently in the breeze, so I have removed the section of lawn between the narrow beds and the patio, and improved the soil with sharp sand, pea shingle and topsoil (fig. 12).



Fig. 7 *Stipa gigantea* and *Eremurus robustus*



Fig. 8 *Gaura lindheimeri*



Fig. 9 *Symphyotrichum lateriflorum* 'Lady in Black' growing through digitalis and gaura

A large number of plants in pots await favourable weather for planting out. Meanwhile, I am poring over bulb catalogues to supplement them.

I have dug out my eucomis from the narrow beds and potted them up in preparation for re-planting in the new garden. Both *E. comosa* 'Sparkling Burgundy' and *E. pallidiflora* Baker subsp. *pole-evansii* had proved fully hardy, but the former has never yet flowered for me, only making many offsets. Similarly, I've had no luck with *Fritillaria persica* 'Adiyaman' as, for several years now, only foliage has appeared. These bulbs too have been lifted and are currently baking in pots in a cold frame, ready to be re-planted in what I hope will be a warmer position.

Other potted plants patiently waiting are mainly herbaceous, but there are one or two shrubs, including a small deutzia, and *Philadelphus maculatus* 'Mexican Jewel', which has looked decidedly unwell since its highly fragrant flowering in June.

The steps down to the patio will be framed by two miscanthus which I have yet to buy (it must be *M. sinensis* 'Malepartus', though there are so many to choose from!).

More by accident than design, I have found in my makeshift plant nursery that the flowers of *Thalictrum flavum* subsp. *glaucum* 'Ruth Lynden-Bell' and *Verbena bonariensis* make a pleasing colour combination so I will try them together. I want to



Fig. 10 *Symphyotrichum laeve* 'Calliope'



Fig. 11 New step and patio



Fig. 12 Garden improvements

use *Geranium* PATRICIA and G. 'Orion' rather than G. ROZANNE.

Though it is quite a coarse plant, I am fond of the clear-blue flowers of chicory (*Cichorium intybus*), which decorate the perimeter of many of our local arable fields; I have three of these to plant out, along with several *Agapanthus* 'Purple Cloud'. Tall fennel, a seedling of the bronze form and beloved of hover-flies, will definitely be used. The trick is to keep them all alive until I get them into the ground.

All well and good, but there is a looming problem of my own creation which I am no longer able to ignore. The pear tree is just too happy! Fully three times its original size, it shows no signs

of slowing down; quite the contrary (fig. 13). The whole raison-d'être of the front garden, to sit and drink in the superb view, is now at risk!

I once went on a walking tour of Wisley led by our President, and among the words of wisdom heard that day was that no matter how dwarf a shrub, or fastigate a tree may be, in the long term they will grow and spread. In this case it is happening all too quickly.

A few years ago, I heard Sir Roy Strong talk about creating The Laskett, his garden in Herefordshire. Among his principal exhortations was that, each time you reach a point where you are satisfied with certain elements of your garden, it is time to "chop it down and start again".

Controversial advice to be sure; but having just finished reading Bob's article, I recalled these words uncomfortably.

Must I really chop down my cherished pear tree? Such decisions are not for the faint-hearted. But time moves on, circumstances change and we cannot be held hostage by our past actions, no matter how appropriate they may have seemed at the time.

I don't think I can do it. Not just yet anyway. After the leaves fall I will trim its silhouette and limb it up, in the hope that it will enhance, rather than conflict with, the new space which has been created around it. But if this does not happen and the tree does eventually have to go, I am going to say "It's not my fault; Bob made me do it". 🌿

©Souren Ala



Fig. 13 Summer 2019

Souren Ala is a gardener who, until some time in April 2019, thought he was not busy enough running his own business and trying to improve his garden.