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Crack addicts Alex Pankhurst

Fig. 1

Isn't it annoying when you spot a thistle or dandelion flourishing smugly between paving stones? With very little possibility of prising out the tap root, it's going to be difficult to get rid of the damn thing. But if weeds find such crannies a convenient place to live, so do many plants.

The previous owner of our house laid down a prestigious Yorkstone patio, which was obviously meant to be steam-cleaned regularly and kept pristine, a place to hold sophisticated summer drinks parties. Instead, under our ownership the pointing between the slabs deteriorated, and I discovered that the resulting cracks were just what some plants love.

Nemophila menziesii 'Penny Black' was the first to move in (fig. 1). A hardy annual from shady glades in California, it apparently

needs moist, cool soil. That seemed unlikely in my arid East Anglian garden, but beneath the paving stones a certain dampness is retained, so conditions are very much to the plant's liking. It grows in the autumn from self-sown seed; begins blooming as early as late February, lifting the heart with its perky little flowers, and continues cheerfully for two or three months. I value it highly. The flowers of the more-common version, *N. menziesii* (Baby Blue Eyes), are, unsurprisingly, blue, but I have turned down offered gifts of that, preferring the striking black-and-white flowers of 'Penny Black'. In mid-summer the plants die off, leaving a certain untidiness it has to be said, but their seeds are busy rolling into any cracks and crannies they can find, ready to burst into flower when winter begins to relax its grip.



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Fig. 2

Paving stones not only stop evaporation from the soil, but act as insulation, preventing the ground beneath from freezing. Thus cracks are a place that even tender plants can find congenial. It was amusing to note a lonely little lobelia sprouting defiantly from a brick pavement in Colchester, presumably a throwback to a nearby tub or hanging basket in a previous year (fig. 2).



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

And in my own garden the legacy of a deceased *Nemesia denticulata* flourishes where the seed obviously fell between two paving stones (fig. 3). Several *Verbena rigida* keep it company – the offspring of *V. r. f. lilacina* ‘Polaris’ grown in a large container, where it proved disappointing. But its progeny had a better idea (fig. 4). A native of Argentina and southern Brazil, The books say *Verbena rigida*, a native of Argentina and southern Brazil, is hardy as long as its roots don’t get frozen. With the paving stone blanket, clearly they don’t. It’s as if the patio is a garden within a garden.

The flora growing on rocky mountains are used to sending roots into crevices. Some years ago I was lucky enough to read about *Campanula incurva*, the Greek bellflower native to Mt. Pelion in central Greece, and sent for some

seed. Ridiculously large blue bell-flowers crowd the plant in midsummer. *C. incurva* tends to be monocarpic, but no matter – masses of tiny seeds are produced which then place themselves in the equivalent of rocky mountain terrain – in this case the tight space between the house and a brick path (fig. 5). Well, who wants a really tidy garden anyway?

Plants are not tidy, they are opportunists. And survivors – mostly. Why is it that our wild violets are some of the most persistent, indestructible plants in any garden, yet their cousins, violas, are shy and apt to give up despite every encouragement? Perhaps the more refined of the family are in need of a bit of crack to buck them up. Certainly an unnamed viola that found its way into the patio seems to have been given a life-enhancing boost (fig. 6).

Every year several osteospermums join it, the seedlings of plants in a nearby bed. Oddly, the ones in the patio seem to be shorter than their parents – a useful trait – although there’s no telling whether this is down to chance or different growing conditions (fig. 7).

It’s surprising that we don’t hear more about another crack addict, *Erodium pelargoniiiflorum*, one of the joys of late spring and early summer (fig. 8). Our courtyard parking area is made up of old, split and uneven concrete, and this Anatolian erodium is a lover of lime. They were just made for each other. The carrot-like roots don’t seem to mind how hot and dry it gets, they presumably store enough moisture, and the plants simply flourish. From early spring to mid-summer great clumps of it flower their hearts out, subsiding only in July to release a mass of spring-loaded seeds, eager to dive into any gap in the crumbling concrete. I sometimes extract young plants and try them in other places, but they don’t seem to do quite as well.

I like the erodium family, but find they can be a bit miffy. Perhaps one needs to be more of an alpine gardener at heart

to be successful with the smaller sorts. A pale-pink one bought as *E. petraeum* (now *E. foetidum*) sulks and fades away. Except in one place in the garden. You’ve guessed it – the Yorkstone patio houses a plant of it which thrives mightily, surrounded by *Lupinus versicolor*, and they make a lovely duet in early summer (fig.9). This blue-and-white lupin, only ten inches high, surely ought to be better known; although in the twenty or so years I’ve grown it, it has waxed and waned. At one time it attempted to take up residence all over the patio, but then got trampled by builders and is only now making something of a comeback. I bought it from a nursery, and the name is now officially *L. variicolor*, but according to the latest Plant Finder no one stocks it. A pity. Harvesting the seeds is difficult because they ping off as the pod splits, but I must try harder, and send some to the HPS seed exchange.

That Yorkstone patio hasn’t known steam-cleaning for forty years, but is it ever likely to be the venue for a sophisticated summer gathering? Well yes. But not of people. It’s the plants who are having a continuous garden party. 🌸



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

Alex Pankhurst has battled with her dauntingly dry patch for more than four decades, learning lessons every year.