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The learning curve

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Fig. 1 *Cirsium rivulare* 'Atropurpureum'

There was a lot of discussion, that's code for moaning, about this year's Chelsea Flower Show centred on the Show Gardens. There's not enough flower: they're too green! And who wants a metal silo in their garden? Spare a thought for those hard-working, very pressured designers who have to be innovative. They may appear relaxed and serene on the television coverage, but as soon as they're off-camera the tightness around the lips returns. They're exhausted by the effort and responsibility, because building a show garden involves a large team and they don't want to let them down.

There were plenty of flower-packed gardens filled with the usual suspects – lupins, lavender, verbascums, peonies, roses, angelica, Siberian irises and alliums. I'm not being critical of the

plant choices here. After all, Chelsea happens in mid-May, when spring is on the menu and we all have to pretend it's summer. This year the weather joined in, but the plant palette has to rely on early-flowering genera. These are the plants that growers rely on to perform. Did I like these flower-packed affairs? Well they were pleasant in their own way, but I want to see new plants and that's where the Chelsea gardens score.

Many a good plant pops up at Chelsea for the first time. Classics that you may well be growing include *Cirsium rivulare* 'Atropurpureum' (fig. 1), that majestic maroon thistle that is always at its best in May. Literally meaning 'thistle from the river' (ie *rivulare*), it resides on the damp, north side of a low wall in my garden among roses. It's backed by the

well-behaved, warm-yellow rambler 'Goldfinch'.

C. r. 'Atropurpureum' is a top bumble-bee plant for *Bombus pascuorum* – the common carder bee. This rusty-backed bee is the main pollinator of my currants and gooseberries, and delving down into the thistle afterwards is a just reward. This micro-propagated, clump-forming thistle produces thistledown in summer, but no viable seed. I am puzzled that several seed companies have taken to selling seeds. That's better than a magic trick!

Geum 'Totally Tangerine' was another debutante, launched in 2010 by Hardy's Cottage Garden Plants. It's another May superstar, although it often carries on producing occasional wands of flower until November. It's the longest flowering geum of



Fig. 2 *Geum* 'Totally Tangerine' and *Amsonia orientalis*

all and it took many years to breed because it involved bringing together the brighter orange-flowered, sun-loving species which prefer dry soil, with the gentler-hued pastels found in damper, woodland conditions. Raised by Tim Crowther of Walberton Nursery, this is said to be a hybrid seedling between *G. triflorum* (female parent) and *G.* 'Mrs J Bradshaw', although I suspect it is a far more complicated cross than that. It's sterile and sterile plants flower on and on, but normally have to be micro-propagated. Not surprisingly, it's been a global success.

In my garden, the perfect partner is *Amsonia orientalis*,

because it peaks at the same time and it's a similar height so you get a combination of dark, wiry stems topped by soft-orange flowers with slate-blue. Amsonias take their time to get going, but they are worth the wait because they have good foliage in summer and they often colour up in autumn. They're extremely hardy and living in Cold Aston, I can vouch for that. They dislike drying out at the root but that's easily remedied if like me, you place the amsonia behind the geum (fig. 2). I've tried several amsonias, but I find this one makes a sizeable clump in my cold garden.

I also grow a later-

flowering one with very narrow foliage, called *A.* 'Ernst Pagels'. Its stems arch over gracefully at first before straightening up, but by the time the blue flowers come out my geum is usually looking rather ragged. The flowers are more star-shaped and possibly slightly darker. 'Ernst Pagels' is sandwiched between 'Totally Tangerine' and a modern salmon-orange rose called 'Duchess of Cornwall'. I grow this in my cutting garden, although when I go out with secateurs I chicken out of cutting my roses. Mr Pagels, who raised many different miscanthus, would I hope be pleased that it's near the ostrich-plumed grass *Stipa barbata*.



Fig. 3 *Iris x robusta* 'Dark Aura'

Dan Pearson's reincarnation of Chatsworth, Chelsea's Best Show Garden in 2015, introduced me to a willowy, black-stemmed dark-blue iris called *I. x robusta* 'Dark Aura' (figs 3 & 4). It was love at first sight for me, just the dark buds and black stems and darkly shaded green foliage won me over. And that was before I saw the French-navy flowers highlighted by yellow beards. I struggled to buy this but it's now available from Avondale Nursery and sometimes Beth Chatto Gardens. I shall remember Dan Pearson's Chatsworth garden forever because it was full of interesting plants, arranged among giant rocks, and I don't recall anyone saying who'd want giant rocks in their garden.

This year I spotted three plants I really want to grow. The first I found in Thomas Hoblyn's Dubai

Majlis Garden. He had the difficult task of recreating a garden in an arid landscape. He had to combine water, the secret ingredient, with plants that would thrive in really dry soil. I have an insight into this, having visited Marrakesh. Tourists flock to the Majorelle Garden, created by the painter Jacques Majorelle (1886-1962), but restored and made stylish by Yves St Laurent and partner Pierre Bergé. The real residents of Marrakesh head for the pleasure gardens on the outskirts of the city, where water tumbles down from the Atlas Mountains. In the evenings, when temperatures cool, people gather, sit under the trees and socialise. Drummers beat out an African rhythm and people dance. This was the spirit of Thomas Hoblyn's garden: the meeting place or majlis, and although garden purists don't



Fig. 4 *I. x robusta* 'Dark Aura'

like the garden at Alnwick Castle in Northumberland, it has the same sort of 'pleasure garden' spirit.

Thomas introduced me to the possibilities of a South African native called *Bulbine frutescens*, with fleshy succulent leaves and small spires of orange flowers. This native of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland is only a foot high and I'd never knowingly seen it before. The next week I went to a plant sale and picked one up, serendipity that often happens. I saw it once or twice in other Chelsea gardens so I suspect spares from Thomas's garden had been eagerly seized on, because at the end of the day designers have to use what's available and they do support each other.

The RHS Plant of the Year competition doesn't always pick a good plant. This year the top prize went to a variegated sedum,



Fig. 5 *Trochodendron aralioides*

say no more! I shan't be growing *Sedum takesimense* ATLANTIS ('Nonsitnal'), a sport found on a nursery on the banks of Lake Michigan by grower Dave Mackenzie. He specialises in plants for ground cover, green roofs and walls. I might put it on a roof, a high one so I can't see it!

In my opinion the best plant was in second place, *Digitalis x valinii* 'Firebird'. I had been given this to trial, and it came through the winter in its pot. 'Firebird', raised by plantsman John Fielding, found its way into lots of Chelsea gardens this year. It's already sold out, because this eye-catching pink digitalis hybrid produces lots of stems from May to October. Dare I say it should have won!



Fig. 6 Andy Sturgeon's M & G garden - the slipper orchid

The third plant that caught my eye was a shrubby evergreen bee-pleaser called *Trochodendron aralioides* (fig. 5). This was in at least two gardens and Andy Sturgeon used it in his best-in-show M&G garden, as did Kate Gould in her Greenfingers Charity garden. This species, the only survivor of a primitive genus, is hardy in milder parts of the UK. Partial shade is probably best, although you need enough warmth to get the nectar to flow because the bees love it. The leathery green foliage supports a head of small green flowers and interesting starry, brown seedheads follow.

Not all flowers are brightly coloured and showy, and some visitors complained

that Andy Sturgeon's garden with the charred black walls was all-green. Did they miss the yellow slipper orchid (fig. 6), or the whorled polygonatum, or the farinated orange primulas, the thalictrum, the luzula, the amsonia and the disporum?

And did they see the dusky foliage and tassels of *Chloranthus sessilifolius* 'Domino', from Cotswold Garden Flowers? It was on this garden. I haven't got a picture of *C. s.* 'Domino', but Peter Clay of Crocus made my four days at Chelsea far less enjoyable when he told me that his 'Domino' disappeared overnight due to slugs. I'm still looking for mine, among the ferns and greenery. No luck so far though! 🐌